

EXPLAINING OUR ISLAM: *New Zealand submitters*

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“GOD is not limited to nor constrained by history, religion, scripture or humanity”
- *The Four Corners*

INTRODUCTION

When the Islamic deen was first propagated on the peninsula by Muhammad and the early community of believers, it was a reformist movement completely at odds with the pagan status quo that existed at that time. It was a message both new and different from what was historically espoused and maintained: Muhammad's declaration of *tawhid*, there is but One GOD, defied centuries of Arab paganism. Muhammad was a man on the move, a person intent on pursing his vision wherever it led thus the early deen was a vibrant, hope-inspiring change and challenge that drew people from all walks of life to it. It was adaptive, it was relevant, it was flexible, it was all-embracing and your race, social status and gender were irrelevant. But like the other two Abrahamic faiths that preceded it (Judaism and Christianity), this new deen too became ingrained, repetitive and little more than an expected duty that ultimately lost all of the wonderful aspects that had made it so successful. This has been blamed on all manner of things by both Muslim and non over the centuries and today still.

Time and again one hears about the Islamic deen's lack of reformation as experienced within Christian Europe, the same which came out of the Renaissance, but we forget that the circumstances that arose in Europe did not arise in the East – even as we fail to appreciate the cultural differences that mitigate against similar responses across cultures. The online debate regarding the need for reformation or the rejection of reformation is something the reader can discover in their own leisure time; suffice to say, increasing conversions to the Islamic deen by Westerners combined with Muslims already residing in the West, will be the key towards any reformation in our opinion. The reasons for this are simple: Western converts are not content (or desiring) to adopt foreign culture norms espoused as being Islamic or as a necessity for the new believer. The ongoing Arabization of New Zealanders, Australians, Pacific Islanders, Indonesians etc. is something we oppose as we believe in a GOD well-capable of relating to all people as per their own cultural norms (including language and dress). Further to this, the presence of Muslims in our societies who are descended from immigrant parents has led to an educated body strongly supportive of democratic rights, in particular the separation of mosque and state. It is these Muslims – often labeled moderates and/or reformers – along with new converts that will lead the way ahead.

What does this mean? This means the advent of a distinctly *Western* Islam, one that does not need foreign guidance, leadership or input but is organic to the community in which it takes root. It is inherently non-political and despises shariah; it ridicules questioning being disallowed and instead demands transparency and integrity from leadership; it develops its own "pillars" and faith norms; it embraces female leadership and gay marriage; it utilizes music, dance and modern media; it values applicability and relevance in today's world over and above theological training; it does not look to the East but to its own spiritual leaders; it does not hold scripture to be the verbatim words of "God" thus what is occurring here in the West will

become (and already is) a struggle between culture and worldview. “Culture” in that the Islam demonstrated in many so-called Islamic states is a stagnant, socially backwards system still proclaiming we *became the best nation that emerged for the people (Sura 3:110)* but what people? Certainly not Muslims in the West today with nothing in common with these failed states. There is also an ongoing struggle between worldviews because the modern Western Muslim has no interest in failed caliphates, archaic shariah, the 5-Pillars or even attending mosque. They do not agree with commonly-accepted norms such as abstaining from alcohol or dating believers only. In fact “cultural Islam” in the West is a fledgling if not irrelevant concept because the idea of a generic cultural norm one must adhere to is simply not part of our matrix whether culturally, religiously, socially or racially. We are comfortable amidst diversity and don't feel threatened by it in the least.

What's more, as Western Muslims, we strongly support democratic, secular governance and separation of mosque and state. We oppose any and all religious rule yet we are deeply committed to the One, drawn on by the simplicity of *tawhid*, the oneness of Creator. Everything else – including the Islamic deen – is secondary to that including conformity to religious norms: we don't want to be “Muslim” we want to be surrendered to the Divine. We have all heard of Muslim reformers-slash-moderates and, whatever these terms are currently explained as meaning in the present, there does appear to be many who are sincere in their desire to redeem the deen within a modern context here in the West. They are to be respected for that. Most of these are overwhelmingly second-generation immigrants who want to rejuvenate the deen from the inside out. The problem with trying to drag the deen into a viable tomorrow is the inevitable frustrations not to mention the social and religious ostracization (think Irshad Manji, Tarek Fatah or Sheikh Hamza Yusuf to name but a few outspoken voices). Yet many of today's Western Muslims are neither immigrants nor reformers but people responding to the quickening of GOD, who have done independent research into the Islamic deen, who sense the truth of *la ilaha illallah*. This alone is important, not the ummah.

Thus the purpose for *Explaining our Islam* is to provide the start of a Western voice that proclaims an Islam of surrender to GOD, not an Islam of surrender to deen, for we have failed to differentiate between Islam-the-deen and Islam the daily action of surrender. Too many of today's Western converts have confused their right responses toward GOD with adopting and following cultural norms at odds to our societies, and have not appreciated our surrender to GOD in a fully Western context; instead, we have subjugated our own cultures and nationalities for a foreign response. GOD did not call us to a foreign deen: GOD called us to GOD thus these writings are aimed at Western Muslims to support and encourage the propagation of our deen our way amongst our communities. We respond to the Divine knowing the One is well capable of granting each community their own path *for every community faces a direction of its own, of which He is the focal point. Vie, therefore, with one another in doing good works. Wherever you may be, God will gather you all unto Himself: for, verily, God has the power to will anything (Sura 2:148)*. It is our intention to vie in our own competent manner as Western submitters and to GOD we are resigned for Sura 2:148 reads *to each is a direction that he will take, so you shall race towards good deeds. Wherever you may be, God will bring you all together. God is capable of all things.*

Rest

Seeing what is in it comes out
once it comes out it is wholly out
all the lines are redrawn into spaces
of abundance

I keep bumping into the Beloved
or does the Beloved keep bumping into me?
It's a nuisance, a revelation
a burning healing

One man fights the flames by beating them
not realizing he is but fanning them further -
providing them with the air they needed
to burn new ground

Let the building be gutted by flame
let the raging torrent run its course;
let the accusing gossip revel in their moment
don't be scared any more.
What will the heavens hurl next?

I'll let you in on little secret:
we are all waves that crest on this ocean
the same without a horizon, all sands in the desert
which bleeds across eternity.
There's not much point getting hung up on moments

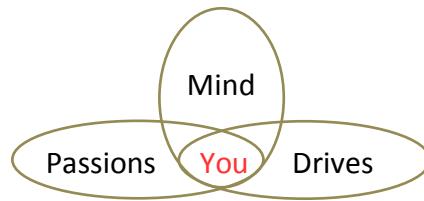
You have stripped me of every covering
but I'm not naked, I'm better dressed than ever!
Thus by Your wholesome grace, o Allah
repose and energy combine into being

We're no longer Jews, Christians, Muslims or Hindus
we're simply followers of You
who leads us to ourselves
who brings us wholly out
to enjoy the dance!

NOTE: It has been decided to locate all the references at the end of the text under their respective chapter headings rather than having footnotes through-out. All Arabic words have been explained in the glossary of terms also found at the back. This PDF is free to be copied, quoted, duplicated and dispersed in any manner whatsoever (including hard-copy) as long as it's for non-commercial purposes only and a reference to us is included somewhere.

PART I: Submission to GOD

Islam is not a religion but an action, and a very specific action; it is one of surrender to the Divine first and foremost, whereby one surrenders the independence of the external self via the internal self. We use the term “external” to represent the mind, passions and the drives; we use the term “internal” to represent the deeper, abiding self that is aware of the One already. The mind is where we think and thus, where we locate ourselves; some believe it represents humanity entirely i.e. we're solely a series of electrical impulses overwhelmingly motivated by our consciousness, which itself has limited duration due to the demise of our physical form (even though we can't yet explain “consciousness” per se). It was Descartes who said *I think, therefore I am* and his opinion endures still, yet the mind is but one aspect of human awareness and intuition. As for the passions, this is our terminology for emotional needs which cannot be separated from either mind or drives, even as the other two cannot be separated from each other or the passions. Each overlaps the other as per the Venn diagram below.



Anger, envy, joy – these are examples of the passions which influence the mind toward specific thought(s) even as the mind influences the passions towards our longing and desire. Similarly the drives are more physical in that they represent cravings such as hunger, thirst, the need for shelter, sexual release etc. but again, the passions can arouse the drives and the drives can arouse the mind so really, we are in each of these even as each of these are in us. So to us *Islam* in its original form is surrendering these very traits individually and collectively to the One: individually in recognizing that no one of them represent us as a human, thus we must relinquish the thought any one of them does, and collectively in that even when said aspects are combined they still do not represent us in our entirety either, so we discard this thinking as well. Instead we see the mind, passions and drives as vital aspects of the human which, when surrendered to GOD, are redeemed back into their proper place and correct use. This we call balance and by such surrender we allow the deeper, abiding self to come forth and direct us.

This internal surrender is not a one-off act but an ongoing, ever-deepening realization in which more and more of “me” and “I” dissolve over time. This Islam is absolutely an individual's decision, one which can happen anywhere at any time for any-body, and in more than one way for the lights of a city may appear differently depending upon where you stand, but whoever is

looking still sees the same city, just from another perspective. Really, it doesn't matter how one finds the boat in the storm-tossed sea, what matters is that they get onboard. For one this may be via a sudden epiphany. For another it may be a long, personal journey of experimentation and research. For yet another it may be that they are Muslim in name only but not in nature and are awakened to a deeper, personal awareness of the One, though you don't actually need to be a Muslim to submit to GOD. Submitting to GOD is not a Muslim act, nor a Christian act or even a religious act but is instead a profoundly *human* act. It is we humans who submit and in doing so we release what preexists within us, an aspect as eternal as the One. This is not a new discovery but, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr accurately explains, an old *recovery*.

Such surrender pre-exists us, religion and scripture thus no-one monopolizes surrender, for it's a personal act: I cannot own your act of submission, you cannot own mine. We are each responsible for our own actions. This is an important delineation to be aware of because *Islam = submission to GOD* is not a religion, whereas *Islam = the deen* is. One must never confuse the two for just as they can entwine they can also separate, and one can end up serving religion not GOD or worse, drive away those who come to the knowledge of GOD simply because the vehicle by which they arrive is not the same as yours or mine. This sort of religious pride destroys, and whilst the orthodox label it "righteousness" they are wrong – they are wrong to drive others away. However one is quickened by the Divine, its evidence is in the nature of the individual, it always is, not in the nature of their religion. For example, we think of Buddhists as being peaceful people, yet the Buddhist's of Sri Lanka have burnt down churches in protest over suspected Christian evangelization. We think of Christians as either historically puritan or in our recent times as charismatic, yet the early Christian mystics like Miguel de Molinos were in a league of their own indeed, they were forerunners for today's Sufi. Many Westerners think of Muslims as violent, close-minded fundamentalists yet many of the deen's critics and reformers are neither but concerned people. The point is that in each of these examples our assumptions of religion are more often than not just that: assumptions.

Now we have all been guilty of believing the thinking mind with its darting thoughts, the busy self with its whirlwind of impressions and the imagination's emotional confusions are the sum total of being human, of being alive, but they're not. Yet the noise in our head has been so complete, the totality of thought so readily accepted that we never stop to embrace *Islam = submission to GOD* as a way of being, as a way of existing and relating. Not temporarily either but in an ongoing, expanding fashion not of religious conformity, but of profound intellectual depth leading to total consciousness. This internal Islam is not a foreign culture whereby we all grow beards, wear knitted skull-caps and give each other Arab names, but a mode of existence. It is not a religion. Religion is utterly unnecessary for knowing the Divine, and any truly spiritual person readily admits this without pause: knowledge of it is not a cause for insecurity. It is a great cause for insecurity if you pursue *Islam = the deen* but then we don't pursue religion, we pursue Allah irrespective of what deen we're in or if in fact we are part of any deen to start with. GOD is greater. In such surrender as this we recognize, accept and believe in the Supreme without us and we recognize, accept and believe in the Supreme within us: all that lies between are notions of an "I", something religion still appears to struggle with.

In truth, no dichotomy actually exists in the above paradigm bar what we choose to accept, and this includes the concept of an "I" to start with, an identity-idea we call Ego. Whilst Ego acts as a vitally important form of self-identity in our early development, over time we have

elevated it beyond proportion. When we create identity-ideas about ourselves we grow into these ideas but forget these ideas “grow” into us as well. Thus the identity-idea we develop as a child, take into youth and develop into adulthood becomes so cemented within its inseparable: it becomes/became who we are now. Such a self-identity is strongly self-preserving *and* self-serving, yet we do need our Ego to create some form of personality-slash-self in our formative years. The problem is that this becomes so identified as who we are that it's

- A) Impossible to think past it
- B) Too threatening to consider living without it
- C) The Ego itself as a mental *passion* does not want to change

Hence as we age and near death some of us revert to almost juvenile behavior because we are so one with our Ego-identity – the same which understands physical death brings an end to itself – that we do anything to deny and/or delay the inevitable. We become children again. This is both an unnatural and a tragic state of mind, yet one that is to be expected when so many of us are utterly disconnected from our deeper, internal selves. One way to look at this is to compare ourselves with a 10-storey building: just as it's made up of storeys so are we and just as it's built upon foundations that originally supported it before its own developing frame started to do the job, so our Ego has taken over the role of support and grown right along with us. Trying to delineate between our own “storeys” as per the building scenario inevitably leads to unnecessary naval-gazing, but it's important to understand that there was an original “foundation” to start with. We just over-grew it.

Whilst we are genuinely afraid of losing ourselves, of losing our thought processes and the self-identity we have created as individuals, this fear is unfounded. It is important to know that. Submission to the One is not the end of the self but actually a new and fresh beginning – you are still you only you are now living from your actual self, “born again” as it were. You are now living *as your actual foundation* which is Allah. From Allah we came, to Allah we return, thus the kingdom of heaven is accepting, incorporating, projecting and enjoying this each and every day in a rewarding manner. There is no fear, quite the opposite for it is living in a state of loving affirmation, and perfect love casts out all fear. This brings balance and if nurtured wisely, ongoing redemption of the mind and our worldviews, so that we gradually conform to what within us is reconnecting to that outside of us. For the outside to change, we must change the inside. Everything that is comes from the Divine who is within and without, even down to the sub-atomic level and beyond. Everything exists right now in the consciousness of the Divine, even as the Divine-consciousness exists through all things including us as substance, essence and form. To embrace this is to live this; to live this is to redeem our Ego-self, restoring it to its correct place in submission to Allah. There is no need to get rid of the Ego; it just needs balance, not ritualized religious practices.

Now Sheikh Isa states in the *Injeel* that he **abides in the Father and the Father in him** which personifies the Islam we are attempting to explain – not the “religion of” but the ongoing act of surrender to the Beloved i.e. that which is within him (Isa Masih), he himself is within. Such surrender is beyond labels because it keeps moving, keeps evolving and is never stagnant. Dogma and puritanical attitudes are not part of its make-up because its fluidity and relevancy never have time to calcify and become such self-defeating anachronisms. This very Isa-nature

emerges in us when our soul, our own internal aspect of GOD in us, reaches out to the eternal completeness of GOD without and in this natural attraction of like drawing like, dualism starts fading. The “I” mentioned earlier is dissolved as we are drawn by the Lord and as we respond in kind, for each response by you and I only serves to deepen and broaden our surrender, such that we let go of and release ourselves from an inherited life time's worth of what are essentially illusions. This then is Islam [surrender to GOD] personified according to our views and this action is not, has never been and will never be a “religion” but an action, and about the most religious it can get is that we willingly do it. Such an Islam as this can be expressed through any religious practice – not just the Islamic deen – but it doesn't have to be; it operates on its own as a natural flow of the universe. It inhabits the universe and the universe inhabits it and you can enjoy and pursue it without ever entering a temple, mosque, church or synagogue.

This Islam we're describing is not the same as the Islamic deen sold as originating with GOD and which cannot be questioned. When questioning is silenced for fear of the accusation of blasphemy, you have a religion of fear and fear only ever seeks to control. Control only ever seeks to rule. Rulers only ever seek the continuation of their own power-base, not GOD. What a heartless faith! Thus we are guilty of anthropomorphism whereby “God” is a giant, 70ft-plus human figure seated on a jewel-encrusted throne, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of worshipping-slash-adoring angelic beings (and those who attained heaven) judging you and I from afar, usually with stern displeasure. Such a monotheistic projection seems to have achieved near universal acceptance within the Abrahamic faiths but it's an opinion, it's what *some* believed, yet unfortunately it has come to monopolize Islamic theology over a thousand years. Such a black-and-white harsh Overlord as this puts the believer on the back foot: they're never good enough, never get it right and are always guilty. This results in religious dogma as people try to outdo, out-perform and outshine one another with piety, virtuousness or any other recognized religious acts of one-upmanship. Such a GOD-idea like this possesses no love, no vibrancy and no *life*, and doesn't exist in you and I as the Divine spark. Such an idea as this is most certainly not innate to us, and is not expressed by our deeper, contemplative selves

Thus our primordial nature, our hidden self where divinity resides which recognizes and knows GOD within and GOD without, it alone should be the root of religion precisely because of this innateness. In truth it already is and always has been – it's the expression of it that suffers. What we need to do is rediscover and recover this in each of us which is the role of Sufism, a systemic practice to bring one to the actualization of said Truth. We call this primordial nature *fitra* and believe *fitra* to be the nature of the Pre Existent in all things and thus, the preexistent nature of all things, including humanity. *Fitra* has many forms: commonly referred to as *ruh* or spirit (the Holy Spirit is its Christian terminology) it inhabits humanity who is able to recognize it, draw upon it and yes, harness it for good. *Fitra* is the Life Force within everything, the hum of sub-atomic particles all around us vibrating and bubbling moment by moment whether as form, substance or essence: it is important to understand this. *Fitra* is the link between worlds, the essence of consciousness in which all consciousness – including our own – manifest the Divine consciousness, the same which encompasses and permeates all things. Thus the moment one is conscious and self-aware they are conscious and self-aware *in the One*, thus consciousness is one vehicle by which and through which *fitra* moves. Consciousness is simply an expression of *fitra* on the levels of imagination, logic, intuition etc. but also feels through the skin, senses

through the eyes, detects via the ears. Consciousness uses the entire human which should not surprise us and, as an emanation of fitra, does not rest.

Now there are three layers to a man: the physical or outer body, the physiological or inner body, then the thinking body or "mind". There are three layers to the mind: the outer or transient mind, the inner or sentient mind and the deeper, intuitive mind (fitra). No delineation exists between the deeper, intuitive self and fitra but to activate it one must work downwards – not upwards – to their center. Not your center, not my center or Sheikh Isa's center, but their own center. No-one can do this for you but you. Think of it this way: how does one locate a buried treasure? Do they build a tower above it declaring they have found it? Of course not, they simply *dig it up* or in Sufi parlance, remove the dirt (veils) between us and said treasure (GOD). This is a counter to our usual spiritual instruction which stresses the need to increase in virtue, in wisdom, in love, in behaviors etc. when in fact instead of building up we should be stripping down to the essential core from which flows everything. We should be removing the veils, the layers, the barriers between ourselves and the One. This includes addressing fears, anxieties, insecurities and the like wherever they have impacted upon our fragile infant/child selves (the effects of which we carry into our adulthood). We should be examining ourselves and demystifying the negative experiences and abuses we've suffered and instigated; we should be accepting the compulsive behaviors of our drives so as to understand and negate them; we should be facing our imbalances as led by the One; we should be resisting the human religious impulse of building up and building upon; we should be letting go of the need to control, to be perceived a certain way, to be accepted. This and more besides is part of Islam and wherever one embraces fitra, original Islam is practiced; wherever surrender to GOD is embraced, fitra is freed.

Unlike fitra however, we believe GOD cannot be defined for that which can be defined is limited, and the Divine we believe upon is limitless and beyond all definitions. The One is not he or she, Jehovah or Allah, Jesus or Krishna but if that is the form the One comes to us in then so be it because GOD is greater, Allahu Akbar. Understand that however we as individuals view GOD dictates to an extraordinary degree GOD to us; thus we empower our own projections in response to the innate GOD-self within. The problem is that when pure water is released into a body of bacteria-laden water, it loses its purity and becomes bacteria-laden itself, thus negating its purity of intent. Thus it is not GOD that defines us but our definitions of GOD that do, which points to the link between us and the One: we "make" our God moment by moment with real-time consequences. The poet T.S. Elliot wrote: *We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.* Remember it is not the end that concerns us but the journey, so we need not concern ourselves with the afterlife but the life we now live each and every moment of each and every day. When your definitions of GOD become gentle, compassionate, humorous, accepting, non-judging and loving, fitra has blossomed in you. When your definitions of GOD remain cruel, unforgiving, harsh, rejecting, judging and hate-filled, fitra has been crushed in you. Truly our definitions of GOD define us. If you believe you must find an external Creator you will never find that which is outside of you, but if you accept that inside of you lies the very fingerprint of GOD, then all things are possible. If you can abide in that which abides in you, you reflect the Divine and experience annihilation. Your awareness sharpens and this is your fitra revealing itself to you.

To embrace fitra is the simplest thing to do and because of this, it is the most hardest for the sole action required is non-action. In the Islamic deen there is a continual format one must follow, continual rituals one must partake in and continual acts one must perform from memorizing the Quran to fasting. In the practice of fitra there is no set format, there are no rituals and no acts need be performed bar meditation and reflection: these are instrumental in releasing our Isa nature. When we learn to simply *be* we have not avoided reality, we have truly grasped it; we have dissolved the illusion of a finite life time and the distractions of the world. This awareness causes us to take stock of ourselves, our reactions and behaviors, our beliefs and expectations and is our very fitra at work. This brings balance into our lives and a stronger presence of fitra not only in all that we do, but also in who we are. When one allows fitra its rightful place within, one does right actions without, thus one must simply *let go* of doing and trust to it. This is not about becoming “perfect” because perfection itself too often becomes the goal and our goal is GOD the Perfect, not perfection; therefor it is perfectly good to follow the Divine for by doing so we will be perfected and this is our assurance. As we overcome the *nafs* our resistance to the Friend dissolves though Ego opposes dissolution, for we know the nafs are in resistance to GOD and resist submitting to GOD, which is the age-old internal struggle for all. Resistance brings suffering and suffering increases the Ego, which in turn increases resistance to surrender even further, and so the cycle recycles.

Submission to GOD has very little if anything to do with intentional wrongdoing or even unintentional wrongdoing, but everything to do with letting go of things (including notions of wrongdoing). We are all guilty as religious beings of censuring our own humanity the moment we enter into faith for suddenly we are expected to be whole, healed, wise, spiritual and free from sin etc. We’re suddenly expected to be perfect super-humans without faults. This is not only an expectation placed on us by those within said system but worse, by ourselves. If this miraculous state (which we haven’t even come to understand) isn’t somehow actualized within us, we call ourselves failures or say the deen “didn’t work”. Yet the only thing complete is the One, not us. The only focus is the One, not us and certainly not deen. Thus in our ongoing state of incompleteness we should be focusing on the Divine not on ourselves, not on what we have or what we don’t have and not on our religious systems but allowing ourselves our own individual humanity – not as justification for our acts but in understanding of what we are. In fact, don’t even focus on change, for what can compare to the One in terms of focus? The love of GOD breaks down all thinking and in this breaking we experience the healing that rips the scab again and again until, finally, we realize the wound is us and not the scab. Thus the Divine is no guarantor for safety; we are not immune from anything our fellow citizens face, so stop expecting deliverance and start taking delivery. Stop waiting for perfection and start serving the Perfect. Stop waiting to become and go be.

PART II: *Going beyond mere religion*

What we described in the prior section wasn't a vague nebulous "feel good" spiritualism cloaked under an Islamic banner but rather, a direct result of abiding in the Divine as modeled by Christ, and *that* is Islamic: that is genuine surrender. Whatever is outside of it or not based upon it is, in our thinking, un-Islamic for it is neither abiding in the One nor is the One abiding within it thus it's a vain substitute, an empty human endeavor. Sheikh Isa says **by their fruit ye will know them** not their religion, and this is our underpinning measure such that yours or my religious affiliations or absence of, are irrelevant. What is relevant is the sincerity of our heart intent and in having a genuine desire to change for the good and revert to who we actually are. This results in clear action such that it can be judged by all as being just, as being a righteous course, as displaying integrity outlined in Galatians 5:22-23 of the Bible as the "fruit of the spirit":

(The fruit of the spirit is) love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

To display such character as above is to display sincere intent on yours and my behalves which, by its own nature, is a change for the good and a "good" that doesn't just benefit us but family, friends, neighbors, communities and ultimately society as a whole. We instinctively recognize its purity and the presence or absence of religion when displaying these fruit of the spirit is irrelevant. Whoever displays such traits whether Muslim or Hindu, atheist or Jew, Christian or Buddhist is recognizable as sincere and genuine thus this state of being which is inherently good, is inherently natural. Inherently *original*.

Unfortunately many believers are unable to go pass religion; it is religion that is paramount and they use such common terminology as "protecting Islam" to bolster their theological alibi. Too many go on about upholding the deen as if it has a life of its own but it doesn't; rather, you and I give it life because you and I live our deen as we see fit (or as directed by others). Yet for many, everything appears judged by deen alone (read clerics), whether via historical precedent or current jurisprudence, but too often it appears as if the deen acts as both origin and destiny. Everything must be encompassed by the deen because the deen must be the center of all things goes the mantra but, when one compares *Islam = the deen with Islam = surrender to GOD*, the deen is actually irrelevant. ALL religion is irrelevant compared to surrendering to GOD: sincere and genuine Islam nee surrender always comes first. Again, many believers are unable to go pass religion; it is inconceivable to them that one can know GOD outside of the Islamic deen (or whichever faith system one follows). It is inconceivable to them that sincere and genuine Islam can be expressed without religious overtures or through different religious expressions. Their endemic myopia is akin to goggles that show one view and one view only, goggles which are literally glued to their faces as a permanent view of the world, but it's not the goggles that matter but the view. It's not the religion that matters but the One for whom it exists for in the first place. Thus we support expressing your Islam however you see fit, whether through deen – including the Islamic deen – or without deen. We do not believe Allah is the least bit fazed by this, yet over such simple statements ideologues maim and murder.

When we judge the authenticity of another's faith by our own – rather than the actual, real-time results of their faith within the community – we automatically consign another's faith (usually with good intent and a sincere belief their being misguided) to the waste bin because we judge by deen, not results. Further, we're automatically biased towards our own religion regardless of what we believe, and to such a degree that its own shortcomings are routinely ignored by ourselves if not *ruthlessly* so. We question anyone and everyone's belief systems, theology and faith fundamentals but often not our own; we stick to our own fundamentals with dogged determination, ignoring the discrepancies therein whether from fear, dogma, ignorance or intimidation. We accept that if our faith were universal (which is of course the right faith ordained by GOD because our sacred writings, also ordained by GOD, say so), then so much suffering would be ended, so much poverty elevated and so much wrong righted. It all seems so clear and obvious to us but we need to resist this elitism and, if we must judge, judge by the simple axiom **by their fruit ye will know them**. In modern parlance this means actions speak louder than words thus better an atheist who is honest and reliable than a Muslim who is deceitful and unjust. Better a humble idolater than a Christian who is arrogant and narcissistic. Better an irreverent, promiscuous person than a practicing Jew who is dogmatic and violent and *this we believe to be a good mindset*. Holding a religious "identity card" does not transpose into immediate validation of character but merely states our religious system; and the problem with our religious systems is all too often they're more concerned with religious authority and power plays, with being authentic and right, than sincere and genuine.

Religion plays but a small part in our original response to the quickening of the One, something we forget; what plays the largest part is you and I making a decision to pursue the Truth and seeing this through, with religion being an afterthought. All of us fit the same criteria: we have made a decision and we're seeing it through for we did not come to deen for its sake, we responded to the quickening of the Divine because it was right to do. How we choose to express this is our own decision but expressed it will be for as Sheikh Isa says in Matthew 5 of the Injeel: **You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.** We can pursue our faith decisions as is or pursue them through established religious systems but then and again we may not, choosing instead the inward way to gather and release our response to Allah, the way of *akonga*. Our specific system as Sufi o te Tahi is awareness-release and meditative practice whereby we allow GOD to bypass the external mind and the noise of our internal selves which moves us towards the deeper, intuitive mind. This is important: just as we believe this deeper and intuitive mind to be *fitra* so too we believe *fitra* as an essence of GOD, draws our internal *fitra* outward to GOD in the first place, for *fitra* recognizes Itself. We believe our response of accepting this occurrence within us is *also* *fitra* so what is drawn, what draws and what responds is the same thing. You cannot delineate between yourself and *fitra*, even as you cannot attempt to define *fitra* strictly as substance, essence or form for at heart *fitra* simply is.

One can see the difficulty traditionalists may have with our Islam for it is not an Islam of religion and never has been, nor will it ever be, but an Islam of surrender – and a surrender that can be religiously expressed if the individual desires it so. Islam is infinitely more important, more valuable and more exalted than any practice or system, including ours. Thus deen is not a

necessity in our way of thinking for knowing GOD by, though like all people, we appreciate the need for good measures by which to measure with. Yet if one wishes to express their surrender religiously then clearly they will embrace the religious norms reflective of that choice whether it be Muslim, Christian, Jew or any other. We turn no-one away from such things but draw a line between practice and surrender: any practice that detracts from genuine Islam [surrender to GOD] whether religious, cultural, gender or ethnic-based etc. is we oppose. A clear measure is displayed by Sheikh Isa in Mark 12:30 when he directs us to **love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength**. Notice not follow his, yours or my particular deen but simply to love GOD, and love with the utmost passion. Those who do this will not go astray. One of the most authentic references for love comes from the *Injeel* through the writing of St. Paul which reads as follows:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

The above is a truly extraordinary text, an exemplar for how we are to treat others by the empowerment of such love. Instead we tend towards the opposite of Paul's words engaging in theological strife, sectarian argument, religious animosity towards differences and incessant judgmentalism. In other words, we are more obsessed with our man-made deen, of being right, than genuine submission to the One. Now we believe the natural state for humankind really is Islam, yes, but an Islam as described here whereby we recover our own abiding self, that internal Presence that already belongs to all people everywhere. Why then have we developed self-exultant beliefs that yours or my religious structures encompass GOD the infinite and thus are superior to all others systems? Does anyone actually *believe* the Limitless can be limited to man-made systems such as yours or mine? Too many of us are guilty of exactly such grand and self-delusional ideas, ideas which don't reflect the love St. Paul described but actively resist it. Sura 5:3 states: *Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion Islam.* What do we think is meant by this passage: does it mean

“Islam” the deen or does it mean “Islam” surrender to Almighty GOD? Which do you think Allah would have us choose: Allah or deen? The Islamic deen as it has evolved today wasn't even in existence then so no, it's not referring to deen, after all, it would be nonsensical for Allah to say today I have perfected your religion...and chosen as your religion *religion*.

Very little theological development had occurred during the life-time of the Prophet and whilst none of us were obviously present then, we intuitively sense the meaning behind Sura 5:3 is reiterating surrender to the One, precisely because this was Muhammad's calling and precisely because the “deen” as its now interpreted today did not exist in said state at its earlier inception. Surrender to the One is the heart-beat of our deen and indeed, exemplifies *tawhid* as our basis, something Sheikh Isa himself reiterated: when asked by a teacher of the law which of the commandments was the most important he replies, **the most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'** (Mark 12, emphasis ours). The Oneness of GOD, which coming from Isa Masih is a phenomenal statement for Christians today to ponder, epitomizes monotheism. It is what submitters to GOD are known for, what we have always been known for and what we will *always* be known for: monotheism. It is the shape, format and action of this monotheism that is argued over, often violently, and this very violence is unfortunately seen as not only innate to the deen but as necessary for it. Nothing could be further from the truth, hence why we as Western Muslims must take care to delineate between our Islam of *surrender to GOD* within our own cultural paradigms and that of the Islamic “deen” as it's perceived as being. Does this mean we're embarrassed of and ashamed by the words and actions of Muslims around the world today? Of course. The enormous amount of media coverage that is granted the violent criminals sheltering under Islam's banner is too big, too broad and too blatant to balance. We have neither the time nor the money to do so, thus we too are painted one and all into the same vicious, hate-filled corner we've absolutely no desire to be in.

This dichotomy between *Islam = surrender to GOD* and *Islam = the religion* strikes us as being further delineated between east and west; no, this isn't black and white, but it does exist to varying degrees. Many fellow Western believers feel "Muslim" internally but not externally at least, not externally in a cultural manner, the validity of which is not as important to us as it is amongst our predominantly immigrant Muslim communities. This creates a source of tension for the Western convert because exoteric Islam is readily identifiable by its external aspects – aspects that mean little to you or me but may be used to convince one they're just not Muslim enough. Such aspects include a foreign cultural mix of dress, language and customs which are not part of our own socio-religious history and hold little if any meaning for us. Those in the deen refer to these very cultural norms as *Islamic* which is not correct; the very term "Islamic culture" is a debatable concept that still divides the ummah to this day. There is no surrender-to-GOD culture only surrender-to-GOD character which redeems culture; if it doesn't then it's a deception, one that ultimately ends up sowing enforced conformity and resentment. Yes, the near inseparability between deen and culture is part of human nature for whatever cultures we come from directly impact on how we believe, but this doesn't justify expounding the culture that surrounds any religious belief as automatically being superior to all other cultures let alone its being religious. The ongoing “Arabization” of Muslims is not only pointless in our opinion, but condescending: does not the Divine communicate equally with all people in the manner most beneficial to them?

When the line between culture and religion is non-existent it paves the way for a deluge of beliefs and attitudes under the umbrella of “Islamic-culture”. The more people accept and believe such pronouncements the more right these very pronouncements become after all, the more people believe something the more acceptable it is. Truth becomes numbers-based. One such example is to this day the orthodox still frown on music and/or the use of icons and symbols in the deen, yet on the Indian subcontinent music is an innate part of its culture thus should be (and thankfully is) integrated into its interpretation of deen. This revolts the puritans. Likewise, pictures depicting Ali are accepted – particularly by Sufi and our Shia brethren – thus pictures of Muhammad should be equally accepted in fact, pictures depicting Muhammad have existed for centuries (the debacle over the Danish cartoons, apart from being extrapolated by the clerics involved *and even added to by them* in a deceitful manner to deliberately ferment outrage, was an infantile over-reaction to what's best described as a non-event. It's believed over a hundred deaths resulted from the violent Muslim response to this non-event). In the West, the inability of Muslims to laugh at them-selves strikes us that, just like the song title, too many Muslims really have become “humorless bastards”. Yes, it is all too easy to pick on the Islamic deen (after all, it holds the number one spot as a faith system to which violence and acts of terror are endemic), forgetting there are millions of Muslims equally disgusted by their own kind, unable to garnish any equal amount of publicity for their moderate views or escape the social stigma and inevitable persecution that follows when stating said views publically.

Strangely, violence and GOD are not opposites in scripture but co-conspirators in the Abrahamic faiths, not just the Islamic deen (whose Quranic imperatives pale when compared to those found in the Hebrew Tanakh), in which G-d orders some of the earliest recorded acts of ethnic cleansing to be performed by Joshua. Here are some examples further to this:

"And Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. And the LORD said unto Moses, 'Take all the heads of the people and hang them up before the LORD against the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may be turned away from Israel.'"
(Numbers 25:3-4)

"And it came to pass, that at midnight the LORD smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead." (Exodus 12:29-30)

"Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and sucking, ox and sheep, camel and ass." (I Samuel 15:2-3)

"And he brought forth the people that were therein, and put them under saws, and under harrows of iron, and under the axes of iron, and made them pass through the brick kiln: and thus did he unto all the cities of the children of Ammon. So David and all the people returned unto Jerusalem." (II Samuel 12:31)

The above Hebrew G-d is said to be the same GOD which Christianity believes in, the same whom Sheikh Isa refers to as his Father, yet who condones the above brutalities. Does this make sense? We absolutely say no: the behavior of the Hebrew G-d is psychopathic. Read the above quotes (and many other examples found in scripture) and it's hard to recognize such a psychopath as being the Divine, as being a "GOD of love" in fact, you couldn't get any further from the love described earlier by St Paul. Again, this is the very same GOD today's Muslims apparently say they believe in but as Muslims we certainly don't, and strongly suspect countless others don't either. Who is remotely interested in such a god as described in Hebrew scripture? Or within Quranic scripture for that matter? We read in Sura 4:56 the following perversity:

We shall send those who reject Our revelations to the Fire. (When their skins have been burned away, We shall replace them with new ones so that they may continue to feel the pain:) GOD is mighty and wise.

A "mighty and wise" GOD has nothing to do with such behavior. A sadistic psychopath on the other hand embraces such behavior; a torturer revels in such behavior; an evil and cruel capturer thrives on such behavior but the Lord? Never. Thus all who proclaim their scripture as the verbatim words of GOD are wrong and they know it – unless of course they believe Allah most Merciful, most Compassionate, really is as described here in the Tanakh and Quran (the Christian Bible is exempt from such ravings bar the *Book of Revelations*, a torturous and rather silly piece of writing that should never have made the canon in the first place). Returning to 1 Corinthians 13 and St Paul's lucid and liberating explanation of love, we cannot reconcile these scriptural monsters with the Divine thus we measure scripture and not vice versa, and that is the destiny and mission for all humanity. In fact, one can be a great scholar, respected sheikh or Grand Ayatollah followed by millions around the world yet if they have not love, they are merely a *resounding gong or a clanging cymbal*; they are *nothing* and they *gain nothing*. So it's stated in the Corinthian passage regarding love and this is the measure we purposely choose for *Allahu Mahabbah*, GOD is love, the same which is extolled by our deceased Sheikh, *Qutb* of his age, who states in the Injeel:

"As the Father has loved me so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 13:9-13)."

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35)."

"If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me

anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him (John 14:15-21)."

The above show an extraordinary mindset foreign to many claiming submission to GOD. The continual theme of love is interwoven through-out and this is a preexisting love for *Allahu Mahabbah*, GOD is love and thus, love is GOD, and love is the basis of fitra. Before everything came into being, love existed because GOD existed and GOD loved. Everything is an emanation from love for everything is an emanation from GOD who is love; everything is an emanation of consciousness for GOD, the Supreme-Consciousness, is in everything encompassed. What do you think Jesus meant by *living or you are in me, and I am in you*? This is consciousness, our fitra or if you prefer, our *spirit*, and said spirit inhabits all sentient things to some degree. This shows the innate connectivity between all of us, the same which connects us to the world we inhabit and the creatures that inhabit our world, as well as our connectivity with the multiverse and beyond. It is science that teaches a cold, impersonal cosmos and whilst we are supporters of science and the many applications it enriches our lives with, science is human-dependent not vice versa. Science strives to incorporate the likes of "consciousness" into its own existing paradigm without considering what science has achieved so far, which is to understand what emerged from the very consciousness that pre-exists us (and science). Consciousness did not just evolve, nor did it devolve into humanity for if we originated from inanimate matter, is it even remotely possible inanimate matter can suddenly became conscious? Of course not. Thus consciousness preceded matter for from consciousness came matter. This very consciousness we call GOD and to GOD we are resigned.

Building upon this you begin to understand that our Abrahamic concepts of "God" as a harsh, authoritarian figure ruling from a celestial throne is non-feasible: yes, such a God as this is promoted within the Tanakh, Bible and Quran, but we do not believe any of these to be the verbatim words of GOD but simply a human response to GOD-experiences. It is our ancestors and us who have, over time, developed theological narratives to explain and encapsulate GOD-ideas, some of which have been beneficial, some which have not. Every person is free to believe or not believe, free to select, blend or utterly disregard but *Allah Akbar*, GOD is greater for none of these validate or invalidate the Pre Existent; this is what we believe. That which pre-exists is not dependent upon that which emanates from it; rather, what emanates from that which pre-exists owes its ongoing existence to what it emanates from. If you stop and allow it, you will understand that what has "made" you and I is responsible for making all things: we are each the building blocks of life, of worlds, of universes – not to be confused with imagining the same level of sentience found in humans being present in rocks or trees (which is animism). In fact, in a physical sense, we share the same materials as plants, trees, birds and animals such as hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen etc. which should not surprise us: we all originated from the same source thus we all share similar aspects whether animate or inanimate.

When Sheikh Isa says he remains in the love of the Lord it should be obvious to all of us that on one level, we all remain in the love of the Lord, in the sense that the love of the Lord remains in us (as Hazrat Inayat Khan puts it: "It is not by self-realization that one realizes GOD, it is by GOD-realization that one realizes self"). Thus when Sheikh Isa stated *I am the Way, the*

Truth and the Life, no-one comes to the Father except through me, we understand that many came to the Father before Sheikh Isa, so what was meant? St. Paul states in Philippians 2 that Isa *being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*. Rather, Sheikh Isa intuitively knew annihilation in GOD was A) the nature of fitra B) achieved through the surrendered self C) the path by which is love. When Isa Masih states that only via the Way, the Truth and the Life can we come to GOD, he is not saying he alone is all those things and thus, only through him can one obtain them. Rather he is saying we are all these things, each and every one of us, and if we awake then through these attributes we reach the Divine for who is GOD quickening? Us of course, thus we *ourselves* are the very way, which is why Sheikh Isa states the obvious: **I am the Way**. Of course he is. Yet another way to read this remarkable passage is as follows:

I AM: the Way, the Truth, the Life,
No-one comes to the Father except through me (i.e. I AM)

The phrase “I AM” is another term for GOD, the divine spark that inhabits us all. No greater testimony to fitra exists than the very consciousness we're born into; the mind and its three layers (external, internal and hidden) are all parts of consciousness, yes, but it intuitively knows the Friend for it is of the same essence as the One. This part of us understands tawhid and accepts GOD-in-us: it is our Ego selves, our doubting mind, our busy and discordant mind that hides such knowing. All who are truly spiritual understand the words Way, Truth and Life, for they are not an attainment but the actual base from which all things are attained. They are not the end but the starting point, the same where all things end. Therefore when Sheikh Isa stated **I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no-one comes to the Father except through me**, he's also saying that he himself is these three things and because they already exist in him as a person, the individual entity that he is has become the very doorway to the Divine. Likewise these three things exist for us: the fitra within each of us is the way, the truth and the life, by which we come to the Lord as well. I do not pass through your fitra and neither do you pass through mine; instead, each of us passes through our own primordial nature, our own *taqwa* on the journey to GOD. Thus we could each say “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” because we have to go through ourselves, into ourselves, down to the very essence of what we are and bring that Isa-nature out so as to blossom, bloom and blow and to GOD we are resigned.

PART III: The sanctity of scripture

Lester Bronstein, rabbi at *Bet Am Shalom* Synagogue in White Plains, New York, America is a Jewish Reconstructionist who explains their views on the *Tawrat* as follows:

"Tradition tells us that the Torah was dictated by God to Moses, and then transmitted through the generations. Reconstructionist Jews see the Torah as the Jewish people's response to God's presence in the world (and not God's gift to us). That is to say, the Jews wrote the Torah. But that is not to say that the Torah is merely a human creation. It is a response to the sacred. It is an attempt to convince an entire people to view everyday life in a sacred way".

According to our own similar view to scripture, this descriptor can be used verbatim for the Quran as well:

"Tradition tells us that the Quran was dictated by God to Muhammad, and then transmitted through the generations. We see the Quran as the Muslim people's (whoever and wherever) response to God's presence in the world (and not God's gift to us). That is to say, the Muslims wrote the Quran. But that is not to say that the Quran is merely a human creation. It is a response to the sacred. It is an attempt to convince an entire people to view everyday life in a sacred way."

Yes, some will find this offensive due to the belief the Quran is the verbatim words of GOD, perfect and uncorrupted when actually the Quran is corrupted, an example which can be found in Sura 4:34 that orders Muslims to beat their wives. How does any remotely intelligent person reconcile GOD most merciful, most compassionate, instructing men to beat their wives? It's ridiculous, especially when we read in the likes of Sura 30:21 the following:

Among His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, in order to have tranquility and contentment with each other. He places in your heart love and care towards your spouses. In this, there are signs for people who think.

Both verses oppose each other and at the risk of sounding condescending, it's hard to have tranquility and contentment as a couple when one of you is "commanded by God" to beat the other whenever you fear or suspect certain "misbehavior" from them (notice too that "God" only seems to support men beating women and not vice versa). Understand that this has been a standardized Quranic passage since its inception and no-one appears to have put up their hand to question its veracity precisely because the Islamic deen is utterly committed in its opposition to being questioned in the first place. If it wasn't, then passages like this would have

long since been classified as ungodly or belonging to a historical time and place (which shows an inconsistent Creator, for isn't "good" *always* good, not just good at certain times?) or the Quran shown as man-made at best or suffering interpolation at worst. As Edip Yuksel author, activist and Muslim reformer points out in the introduction to *Quran: A Reformist Translation* compiled with Layth Saleh al-Shaiban and Martha Schulte-Nafeh:

"The main problem comes from the word iDRiBuhunna, which has traditionally been translated as 'beat them.' The root of this word is DaRaBa. If you look at any Arabic dictionary, you will find a long list of meanings ascribed to this word...to travel, to get out, to strike, to beat, to set up, to give (examples), to take away, to ignore, to condemn, to seal, to draw over, to cover, to explain etc. Additionally, the word nushuz, which is generally translated as 'opposition' or 'rebellion' in 4:34, has another meaning. If we study 4:34 carefully we will find a clue that leads us to translate that word as embracing a range of related ideas, from flirting to engaging in an extramarital affair...This phrase emphasizes the importance of loyalty in marriage life, and helps us to make better sense of what follows. Interestingly, the same word, nushuz, is used later in the same chapter, in 4:128 but it is used to describe the misbehavior of husbands, not wives, as it was in 4:34."

Thus in the *Quran: A Reformist Translation* one reads:

As for those women from who you fear disloyalty, then you shall advise them, abandon them in the bedchamber, and separate from them

This is an interpretation that's more in line with the Quran as a whole and GOD as we understand GOD to be. We have nothing but admiration for the authors in challenging the oft-held belief that the Quran (like scripture before it) is unchanging, because clearly it is, and it's changed because we as human beings just changed it. What's more, we changed it for the better in this example, and those who disagree whether through fear of "tampering" with the traditional – and tragic – interpretation of the Quran or any other reason show their slavish commitment not to GOD, but human interpretations passed off as the words of GOD. In fact, to not look into the background of the Quran's authorship and editing, to not understand the political climate when it was compiled, to not even question the veracity of such controversial passages as above or simply to not question the Quran at all is to limit the Islamic deen to a now 1400yr-old text that is increasingly blank regarding today's challenges when GOD isn't. You and I need to use our own GOD-given intelligence and not limit the Divine to a place and time in history so GOD bless Edip Yuksel, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban and Martha Schulte-Nafeh for having the courage to stop and say, "wait a minute: this passage is about as far-removed from our GOD-idea as you can get so let's unpack the Quran further and see what was missed". In many circles this enquiring and scholastic attitude is sadly labeled "apostasy" whereas we call it investigative research or, to be even more realistic, common sense. At least in the West.

What we forget is whilst scripture may be set in concrete, the interpretations regarding it are forever changing, diverging, dividing and rejoining in continuous ways. This is not so much because scripture is a living thing inasmuch as we humans are, for we are always expanding our constructs, concepts and collusions – especially of a religious nature. This shows us "scripture"

is not sacred, is not apart from us, is not aloof and untouchable but a vibrant and living thing *because of us*. You and I and humanity as a whole, we are the focus for scripture not scripture the focus for us, because our focus is GOD and scripture is but one expression of this. The fear is that if scripture really is man-made then this admission will bring the deen into disrepute, opening it up to all manner of innovations and teachings without (sacred) scriptural support. This is true if your faith is based on the Quran but absolutely irrelevant if your faith is based on Allah, the same whom we believed in before we read scripture or joined with any deen. If parts of the Quran can be misunderstood as the traditional translation for 4:34 testifies to then yes, such questioning as this will bring the Quran as a whole into disrepute because if one part can be misinterpreted, other parts can be as well but so what? If one is convinced of the Quran's divinity they have nothing to worry about: let it be examined to the nth degree – in fact, let all scripture be examined thus. As for us, we welcome all such inquiry because what it really shows is the evolution of our monotheistic spirituality (the many interpretations of scripture which abound today whether through *fatwa*, *madhab* or individual *ijihad* have existed for centuries, often in conflict one with the other, yet ALL without the deen's demise).

The point is that society has thankfully moved beyond the archaic community to which the Quran was directed – including the majority of Arab society – and large parts of scripture are inapplicable to us today (the same goes for both the Bible and the *Tanakh*). For example, the Quran states when a woman is raped she needs four witnesses to the fact whereas today one witness will suffice, along with DNA samples and thorough police work – in fact a witness is not even required when DNA is matched. What we have now is infinitely better yet there are still those who will not accept modern improvements such as this and irrationally insist upon shariah, revealing how trapped they are in thinking the Quran embraces the all of life when it doesn't because *life has moved past* the Quran. In the above example regarding rape we realize the Divine has revealed to humanity new technologies that advance more equitable justice and thus, better laws for society than what the Quran offered, and the way to understand this is that the revelations of the Lord are ongoing. They did not start with the Quran nor do they end with the Quran or any scripture for that matter. A common misconception within the deen is that revelation actually ceased with the advent of the Quran, the Quran is the final scripture and Muhammad is the final prophet – at least within the Abrahamic faiths – even though none of these statements are in the Quran itself. Rather, they are part of one's theological premise. We need to understand that revelation is not confined to one format (written text) but even if it were, we understand the revelations of GOD are not limited to nor constrained by history, religion, scripture or humanity.

It is also nonsensical to think GOD provided three different scriptures for the three faith communities – Jewish, Christian and Muslim – who historically (and to some degree still) have been at odds from words to war but it's *not* nonsensical if scripture is but our human response to our GOD-ideas. The Muslim states that prior scripture became corrupted; the Christian says the New Testament invalidates the Jewish scriptures; and the Jews neither recognize nor accept either Quran or the Bible as scripture anyway. These petty arguments over deen are utterly irrelevant as we remind ourselves of the words of Sheikh Isa, **by their fruit ye will know them** and not their religion. Thus far already some readers will have decided we, as Sufi o te Tahi, have gone beyond the pale by not recognizing or accepting the Quran as being GOD-inspired but note that it is the Quran that says the Quran is the word of GOD – not GOD. In this circular

reasoning if the Tanakh, Bible or Quran state they are the Word of GOD then they must be true because they're the Word of GOD, even if they contradict one another (or themselves) which they do. This circular reasoning is a commonly held, unquestioned belief within the Abrahamic branches regarding our sacred writings, but nothing changes whether scripture is the Word of GOD or not because GOD doesn't need scripture: people do. Truth is truth irrespective of whether it's the *Bhagavad Gita*, Book of Psalms or the *Nahjul Balagha*. However, for the generic Muslim deen, such flexibility does not exist because its entire basis is cemented into and by the Quran from jurisprudence to shariah to a complete way of living and accompanying social interaction. This doesn't mean "religion" is unnecessary but it's important to place religion, its followers, its scriptures and its religious leaders in their correct place as *available* but not essential. We don't say this casually but we do say this honestly for the Divine was known to humanity before the Islamic deen, before Christianity, before the Hebrew tribes. The Friend was known before all our collective scriptures, the same which we deign to imagine encapsulates GOD when really all they encapsulate are our concepts and constructs of. The fact of GOD not being confined by scripture is best explained in the words of Dr Nasr Abu Zayd (taken from his acceptance speech given for the Cleveringa Chair at Leiden University, 2001):

First, what is the Word of God? Is it the content of the message expressed in human language? Or does it include language as an essential component? The most obvious Quranic expression is mentioned in chapter 18:109 and 31:27 where it is emphasized that the Words of Allah are infinite and non-exhaustible. Even if all the trees on earth were pens, all the oceans ink, with seven oceans behind them to add to its supply, the Word of God could not possibly be exhausted. Therefore, if the Word of God is impossible to be confined whereas the Qur'an as a text is limited in space, the Qur'an should only represent a specific manifestation of the Word of God.

Doesn't such a logical, sensible explanation as this (which saw Dr Nasr Abu Zayd forced to leave Egypt and labeled an apostate by the clergy) clearly show that the Quran is but an inth, a fraction, a mere particle of GOD's wealth? Yet many a scholar and cleric state anything not able to be supported by the Quran, its associated texts (*hadith*, *Sunnah* and exegesis etc.), prior legal rulings or even the clerics themselves is *bidah*. In other words, all revelation stopped with the Quran, a grandiose claim not even the Quran makes. Such men (they are always men) have a God that is limited to a book. When did revelation cease and miracles stop? When did angels no longer appear and prophecy end? Why, when scripture was finalized of course, which begs the next question: when did any of these miracles owe their authority and very existence to scripture? If they existed before scripture why would the advent of the written word halt them? Surely such things did not occur (if in fact they ever did) at their own behest but at the Lord's direction, so are we saying the Lord's direction ceased when scripture was compiled? Of course not, but that's how such things have been explained, accepted and propagated down through time to the present. Muslim's have even bought into the interpretation of Sura 33:40 somehow stating Muhammad is GOD's last prophet:

Muhammad was not the father of any man among you, but he was the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets. God is fully aware of all things.

The entire concept of Muhammad-as-last-prophet (again, something not mentioned in the Quran) is a theological construct Islamic scholars have argued for in the belief this is what's meant by the word "seal", even if the passage is about as far away from such an interpretation as possible. If we read Sura 33 we see it deals with Muhammad marrying Zaynab, the divorced wife of his son, yet such marital relations were not permissible; Muhammad pointed out the son in question was adopted and not a blood relation, thus it was permissible for he "was not the father of any man among you" (this simply reiterates the same point). Sura 33:40 is actually testimony to Muhammad's character, thus stating that he was the "seal of the prophets" is a character reference i.e. he was above reproach in the matter, yet to state such a thing as we just have is viewed as blasphemy by some. The downside of having such rigid and entrenched beliefs is that the notion of GOD being known outside of religion is simply incomprehensible: there has always been deen and "God" has always been encompassed by it. Simply put, just as there is no separation between mosque and state, so there is no separation between GOD and deen to many. To even suggest such a thing is again blasphemous, yet clearly the Friend was known to our ancestors who lived before our deen. It is for this very reason we state genuine Islam as being an authentic, sincere submission to the Divine *first and foremost* and whatever follows is secondary. Throw every Quran, every Bible and Tanakh into a giant fire and yes, they will burn, but the knowledge of GOD continues forever. Fitra does not require scripture but whatever helps one towards it, including scripture, obviously will be of great benefit. Just not essential.

PART IV: Past format and form

To say that one must be Muslim to know GOD, or that one must believe the Quran is the final, complete word of GOD to understand the Divine, or that you must believe Muhammad is the last messenger to know the Lord correctly is not only untrue, but really quite silly. These are religious injunctions, not Godly prerogatives for *Allah Akbar*, GOD is greater – greater than we believers, our scriptures, our prophets, than us and our “religious injunctions”. Who are you or I to say the Divine can only be known like this or must be followed like that? Do we possess such authority? Each chooses their own way and Allah will examine us all whether Jew or Christian, Muslim or Sufi, Hindu or Buddhist, man or woman, old or young, believer or non for GOD who is greater is not encapsulated by any of these. Besides, is it even feasible let alone possible for such a capturing of the Essence? We say no. If your goal is extolling your belief system and deriding all others; if your goal is upholding your way as the only way and all else but fallacy; if your goal is the exonerating of your deen and the removal of religions opposed then your fear opposes love, and GOD is love, and your opposition is to the One. Thus we must learn to see, hear, touch upon and perceive the Friend *beyond* religious formats i.e. GOD outside of religion. What does that even look like though and are we capable of grasping ahold of it?

Belief systems come with humanity – they do not pre-exist us but rather co-exist with us in the sense that we effectively bring them into being. What's more, we either believe from a starting point of truth or we believe through vain projection. If we believe from a starting point of truth it's because the Truth was made known to us, and this is the origin of love. If we believe from our own vain projection, we do not know the truth (or perhaps don't know the truth *yet*), desperately desiring otherness exists somewhere, somehow, in the hope death is not final and there's more to life “than just this”. These projected beliefs of hope in life after death equate to doing everything *right* so as to receive this eternal life; this is how we interpret it to ourselves. Such projection is the shadow of the origin of love for it originates from fear and propagates itself through judgment and guilt. Regardless, to fashion a system of belief from either is a distinctly human act, and we must recall that no belief system is made or finalized in a life-time, but developed over several. In fact some religions are renowned for their continual evolutions and this ongoing change is what defines them, thus it is their adaptability that ensures their continuation, something all system-practitioners can draw from (in many regards this personifies Sufism as Sufi o te Tahi are simply another evolution of it). Regardless, it is usually the historical records of our early “pioneers”, later immortalized as saints, along with their reputed thoughts, sayings, actions, struggles and miracles that create the foundational basis for our resultant belief systems – albeit with a dash of flair, exaggeration and some editorial license thrown in. We must also remember that the further one is from the proclaimed events in time on which their deen is based, the more one is able to play on them, develop them and create an entire mythology which can never be tested because historical events + time = *valid*.

Through oral tradition and later written word, non-existent figures, faraway places and impossible events become a living inspiration down to the present that became both basis and aspiration for today's belief systems. Every time believers have taken the liberty to incorporate, change, rewrite, interpolate and redact our various editions of these historical events as needed (which we have done over the centuries), we reiterate again just how "living" religion is. Such social historeligious editing was required after the Israelites had been taken captive *en masse* to Babylon to shore up Israel still being GOD's chosen people, the rationale being Israel forgot to uphold the covenant. Such social historeligious editing was required after the death of Jesus Christ to immortalize his prophethood and ensure the continuation of his teachings to some degree, which were of course St Paul's propagation of the Christian "new covenant" usurping the older Jewish variant. Such social historeligious editing was required after the death of the first Caliph to keep the evolving deen focused and united when internal divisions were splitting the community whose one commonality was the Quran, even if it was interpreted differently by different communities. What we call "sacred writings" then are our response as submitters to this need for otherness, one we weave into the ongoing narrative of Israel's God, Christianity's Father and the deen's Allah, rightly or wrongly. However, a difference between God's relating to humanity can be observed within the Abrahamic strands: Israel's God was involved with countless men and women from all walks of life over and over, again and again. Christianity's God was involved with Jesus Christ the mystic and a handful of others: Paul, James and John to name a few (and they were very few). Allah communicated solely with Muhammad so we note a shrinking interaction between the Abrahamic GOD and those chosen to interact with him. Does this dwindling relationship make sense? We say no.

Today, whatever interactions occur between GOD and Jew, Christian and Muslim is not accepted as equal to earlier interactions between GOD and Jew, Christian and Muslim. Why is that? Earlier events as told by scripture are upheld as being infinitely superior to later events outside of scripture. Again, why is that? What this shows is the importance we blindly attribute scripture with: ancient history ensures no-one can verify its recorded events, which is of great importance to maintaining its air of mystique. This traditional, myopic view of scripture ensures not only the supremacy of scripture, but that nothing after will ever compare. Nothing after can ever become scripture. Thus a historic place and time, real or imagined it really doesn't matter but which can never be reproduced in our evolution as a species, is the sole measure and rule for religions the world-over and their adherents. This is not only unrealistic but nonsensical in that it assumes the divinity is unable at most, unwilling at best, to continue not only the same intensity of communication between us and Itself but to actually surpass it. Irrespective of whether scripture be an accurate record of interaction between God and humanity or simply gobbley-gook, the irony is scripture expounds in no uncertain terms the greatness of God, the limitlessness of God, the eternality of God, the ability for God to do whatsoever God chooses to and our response to these globally-accepted statements is to declare this very God limited to scripture. Does that make sense? We say no. If GOD is not limited to scripture, why are we? Scripture, as mentioned earlier by Nasr Abu Zayd, is but an *int* of revelation and what's more, scripture is not the only form of revelation GOD uses.

We understand all that which is true comes from fitra within us, continually creating and bringing forth moment by moment, the same which Sheikh Isa names as **the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he**

lives with you and will be in you. In fact, by the time you reach the end of this very paragraph, who knows how many millions of our fellow humans will have experienced this very revelation from the truth we call GOD – many without ever having read or heard a single verse from our scriptures. Thus historical scripture is a guide and one that still contains important truths for us all, but to live our lives in strict accordance with it is silly: scripture exists for us, not we for it for scripture was created by our own hands, not GOD's and only the One is worthy of worship. Whatever we take from scripture into our time and place then is clearly at our own discretion. One takes this and another takes that, whilst still another may take nothing at all for we all know and accept GOD does not need scripture. What's more, we can follow GOD without it and many fellow humans have been doing exactly this: Sufism, which existed before the Islamic deen, is a clear example of this. Ours is a practice of loving the divinity for GOD is love and perfect love casts out all fear. If we, who do not live according to scripture but as free people do not fear, why do those who live according to scripture and their resulting shariah, fear? We do not fear GOD, we love GOD – GOD without and GOD within, even as GOD within loves GOD without, and GOD without loves GOD within, such that there is and has only ever been, one unending emanation of GOD through the worlds. You and I are part of this emanation, but few are those who possess such a faith let alone the courage to release it.

Now we read in scripture that GOD told Abraham to sacrifice his son, Moses brought the plagues upon Egypt and Jesus Christ (aka Sheikh Isa), walked on water. In the Quran we read Solomon even spoke to the birds. Many of these stories have found their way into written form, were declared sacred at an unknown time and much later, began the metamorphous into what we term “infallible” even though we know:

- A) A loving GOD asks no parent to sacrifice any human because that is repulsive;
- B) People don't walk on water, they sink – that's the law of weight and gravity;
- C) Whilst people can understand some bird calls and the characteristics of birds, they can't have two-way conversations with them: that's called insanity.

Are we saying the Tanakh, Bible and Quran are lying? To be pedantic, sacred texts don't lie, people do – in this case the same who compiled the Tanakh, Bible and Quran to begin with. *They* lied when they wrote that the One asks people to sacrifice human beings; they lied when they said people can walk on water; they lied when they told us humans can have two-way conversations with birds. For us it's pointless being overly pedantic about this because we don't accept flawed scripture as the verbatim words of GOD anyway, especially when large parts of scripture are mythological tales more than anything (which is okay if from such mythical events people draw helpful comparisons and deeper truths leading to a more authentic engagement with Reality). What's more, this type of revelation is not limited to nor monopolized by religious writings and/or sects but can be found through novels, poetry, art, music, dance, theatre and even simple reflection. For us, we believe all sacred texts are but human expressions reflecting human responses to the wonderful GOD-idea innate to you and I, not the verbatim words of GOD. Irrespective of who compiled our scriptures or any writings for that matter, we hold that wherever truth is found it is always worth pursuing, not just for religious reasons but for its own revelatory worth. This is an example of GOD beyond format and form, beyond religion, beyond every conceivable theological construct or philosophical paradigm used to encapsulate the One

with. It is not the Western GOD-idea of up and out because to go up and out lands you in the cold vacuum of space; rather it is the sufic practice to reconcile one's self to GOD within, and to fully comprehend this in every way, for how you live internally reorders your external reality. You and I make our worlds and the actual physical brain grows into such density. This is the creative right of every human being; you and I have a right to not only be here, but a right to dictate just what and how "here" should be, both internally and externally - internally as per our fundamental presuppositional basis and externally in upholding these in the wider world.

As others have communicated upon and researched in, the majority of humanities belief systems share large commonalities, which shows the dormant yet still pulsing influence of our innate Isa-nature or fitra. In the Abrahamic faiths we all come from one individual originally in terms of belief, though it's fair to say this has been confused from later contributions of many great religious figures through-out the journey; the whole point here though is to reiterate humanities drive towards *system-hood*. We "systemize" religious history, figures, time frames, events, teachings and the like into a theological narrative which appeals (obviously this is not just confined to belief systems). In its early stages this new syncretic belief is ridiculed but, if it takes shape and more importantly takes ahold amongst people, it becomes a threat (note difficult times and oppressions are empowering for religious hope rather than detrimental to it). As religion streamlines into a comprehensive whole, more people are converted, and from being persecuted to actively resisted this belief system spreads, becoming a social reformist movement which transforms society into its own image. At this point said religion is identified with the society and vice versa thus becoming mainstream, enshrined as a societal norm and granted political-slash-legal clout, at which points its demise is dated. State religions are ultimately destructive to the very religion the state enforces precisely because of all that should be freely chosen and freely rejected religion should be at the top of the list: GOD is not a pistol-to-the-head offer. That is why no religious state with its subsequent laws (think Saudi Arabia, Iran or Pakistan) can survive the inevitable resentment and resistance of its people if its laws do not evolve with the times and of all laws, religious law is the most rigid and least adaptable (ironically it is due to extremists in the first place that the very deen they strive to impose drives the majority of right-thinking people from it).

Religious law is a poor substitute for our successful, secular and democratic societies because religion is innately opposed to both secularism and to democracy. Why? Because both refute its claim to power and its profession of containing innate authority: secular law is seen as anathema to religious law because sharia – or the sharia state – is seen as the epitome of true Islam (it isn't), whilst democracy gives people the choices sharia denies them, thus democratic systems are strongly opposed as well. The Islamic state on offer today is an exact replica of the old USSR and life behind the Iron Curtain which the communists established as the worker's paradise only in places like Germany pre-unification, the workers were all desperate to leave and strangely, no-one living outside the communist utopia ever wanted to enter. The same goes for Pakistan or Iran or Saudi Arabia: who in their right minds wants to live in any of these places? The Islamic deen touted today even has its secret police force otherwise known as the "religious police", with the *Mutaween* of Saudi Arabia and the *Hisbah* of Iran busily enforcing religious edicts in what must be the most grotesque display of compulsory religion – which is expressly outlawed in the Quran (Sura 2:256). Understand that if the Beloved had chosen Islam [surrender to GOD] as the faith for humanity yet there's no compulsion in religion, then clearly

humanity is completely free to reject what GOD has chosen for it. We should explain this and, love it or hate it, protect this basic Muslim right as an intrinsic human right and not persecute people for it, least of all Muslims who leave the deen. When any faith-community member leaves they're all too often labeled apostates subject to rejection, persecution and even death at the hands of their own communities or worse, their own family members. Too many have bought into the lie that forced obedience is the Lord's desire for humanity which is ridiculous.

When faith-communities close ranks against those who change from it or leave (if in fact they actually can) it's usually out of a feeling of betrayal but it's also part of the communities *fear*. Specifically, the fear that if one person goes another may follow; if one person questions another may question; if one person dares to think outside the "box" others will also do the same and thus the trickle becomes a downpour. So closing ranks is not just about keeping believers in it's also about keeping threats real or imagined out. Having a GOD beyond religion makes this group-think unnecessary because if you abide in the Father and the Father abides in you, then you are not threatened by whoever comes or whoever leaves because they do not affect your trust in or love for, the Lord. They don't validate or invalidate your convictions and beliefs one iota. This doesn't mean you discard the guidelines or the responsibilities of your belief-system but rather, the opposite: you are so convinced of your faith that you intuitively know you have nothing to fear if you're the only one following it. We read in I John 4:18 of the Injeel

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

We need to overcome our fear of GOD – that is a Hebrew concept, not ours. We need to overcome the belief that GOD and deen are inseparable: that is our concept, not GOD's. We need to know the Divine beyond religious trappings as an authentic reality in our own lives and not a communal belief said community self-monitors. If you know GOD in you and thus know GOD through you and so know GOD beyond you, there is very little religion can offer you but much you can offer the religious. However, the religious are the most outspoken that you cannot know GOD correctly if you do not follow their doctrines, and in this they are wrong. Because so many of our rituals, practices and theologies have become calcified, it should be self-evident to all that religion does not encapsulate Allah. It should be self-evident to all that theology does not encapsulate Allah but is our human need to explain the world to ourselves, our means to justify what we hold dear. In effect, much of our faith could best be described as human projection, large amounts based on adopted texts we hold sacred as "scripture". However, revisiting our earlier examination of John 14:6, because the Divine is within you already; because you yourself are a living, breathing thumb-print of GOD's workmanship; because you exist in the One as substance, essence and form, all these are material evidence that you are the way, the truth and the life by which and through which you will return to your origin. This is important to realize: we do not "arrive" at a new destination but return to our original starting point, the Divine, a journey that begins with you and ends with you, and which needs you to enact it by, and in which religion is simply an option.

Irshad Manji, the Muslim activist from Canada points out in her book *Allah, Liberty and Love* that individualism is lacking amongst us, thus Muslims are still seen by far too many simply

as a faceless, nameless cog in the machine called the ummah (irrespective of the global Muslim community being in a constant state of fragmentation). To a definite degree it is held that the Muslim individual be subservient to the masses, each of us another link in the chain wielded by some authoritarian figure beyond reproach. Thus the faithful Muslim must always be obedient and inevitably, always be disposable (have you ever noticed that imams and mullahs don't become shahids, only the lower-level types do? It's food for thought). In the top-down deen being propagated as authentic Islam in far too many parts of our world today you do not question, you do not challenge and you never disagree: to do so may merit anything from criticism to physical violence to being labeled a non-believer. This Islam is conspicuous by its absence of love one for another. Instead you conform, you accept and you obey or – as shown in the gruesome case of Mohammad Shafi, the Canadian Muslim who proudly murdered his three daughters and wife to preserve his warped sense of family honor – you suffer. The thinking behind this worldview is anathema to Westerners: we do not accept it as being Islamic which goes a long way towards explaining why we are opposed to "foreign" attempts to shape, condition and guide our Islam or worse, try to enforce a foreign culture over us. It's not that the new Western convert (the term "revert" is a misnomer) thinks the Islamic deen harsh or unforgiving inasmuch as the new Western convert sees the deen as culturally alien, irrelevant and oft times just plain stupid. It's rare we hear such language used in the public domain about the deen but quite frankly, large parts of the Islamic deen *are* stupid to the new convert and here are a few reasons why:

THEM	US
The new convert must take on an Arab name.	Stupid – you already have a name, use it.
The new convert must pray in Arabic.	GOD is an Arab now? That's a stupid assumption to make.
The new convert must keep the 5-Pillars.	Who came up with these 5-Pillars? The Quran didn't so why follow them? To not ask and debate such questions is stupid.
The new convert must adopt Arab dress.	Stupid (especially if you're a Muslim in Alaska).
The new convert must learn Arabic so as to read the Quran properly.	GOD can use English translations for good just as much as French translations or Arabic. To say otherwise is to limit GOD...which is stupid.
The new convert must attend mosque.	I have to attend a place of worship where men and women are <i>separated</i> ? This is the WEST stupid, read the fine print.
The new convert must follow the <i>Sunnah</i> and the <i>hadith</i> .	If you say the Quran is the word of GOD yet I have to follow these other important things, then why aren't they in the Quran to start with? Isn't that just stupid?
The new convert should not make friends with unbelievers (except for the purposes of <i>dawah</i>).	Now you're telling me who I can be friends with as well? You really are stupid.
The new convert can only listen to music where the vocalists are unaccompanied by instruments (though drums are permitted).	Dear Mr Stupid, please stop talking now.

If we do not adopt the fundamental attitude that we are responding to eternal GOD and not religion, what happens when we see hypocrisy in religious leaders or even ourselves? What happens when the flaws and failings of our religious expressions become obvious? What do we do when we realize our religious institutions don't hold answers to the questions we have or if they do, said answers are so convoluted if not outright ridiculous, they fill you with despair? One example of this is the continual, on-going debate as to whether Muslim women can marry non-Muslim men, an archaic argument you would've thought today's ummah had long-since moved on from but no, it's still doing the rounds as Islamic scholars make decisions that Muslim adults seem to have abdicated responsibility – and maturity – for, much to our shame. Yes, this man-made controversy is, yet again, based on historical Quranic passages relating to a specific time, place, community and area which hasn't stopped the traditionalists from dragging them 1400yrs forward and proclaiming them as equally valid to all today (they aren't):

Do not marry the females who set up partners until they acknowledge. An acknowledging servant is better than one who sets up partners even if she attracts you. Do not also marry the males who set up partners until they acknowledge. An acknowledging servant is better than one who sets up partners even if s/he attracts you. (Sura 2:221)

Today, the good things have been made lawful to you, the food of those who have been given the book is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them; and the acknowledging independent women, and the independent women from the people of the book before you, when you have given them their wages, protected, chaste, and not seeking to take lovers. (Sura 5:5)

2:221 states a non-believer is better than an idolater, because an idolater equates other gods with GOD whilst Sura 5:5 states chaste women, Jewish or Christian, are lawful – for men. Why just men? Because there's no similar directive for women. The fact that one rule exists for males and another for females shows the patriarchal culture of those who assembled/edited the Quran, a delineation that continues down to the present day and one we don't believe the Divine is remotely supportive of. It is myopic and short-sighted that a verse directed towards males which does not have a twin stating the same for females, has since become the sole basis under "Islamic law" for this ongoing sexism. Some say Muslim women should marry Muslim men for the sake of the ummah, but this "ummah" spoken of is the same disjointed fantasy it's ever been, to which we owe nothing. It certainly hasn't done anything for Western Muslims. Some comment because religion arises from the father, a misogynist assumption, all Muslim women should marry Muslim men because a non-believer will not teach your children Islam yet if a Muslim male marries, say, a Jewish female, do they really expect her to teach their children the deen? No, thus such reasoning is equally fallacious. Some say a Muslim woman married to a non-believer will lose her Islamic rights when in fact, under Western law, she has infinitely more – and better – rights no male can take from her irrespective of their social standing or hers. Lastly, some say that a Muslim woman will struggle in regards to inheritance, divorce and the like which again assumes Islamic law is superior regarding inheritance but it isn't. One thing which does need to be kept in mind though is this: do any of us *really* believe in a Quran where a verse directed at males is not applicable to females if it's not clearly stated so? Of course not.

O you who acknowledge, if the acknowledging women come emigrating to you, then you shall test them. God is fully aware of their acknowledgement. Thus, if you establish that they are those who acknowledge, then you shall not return them to those who do not appreciate. They are no longer lawful for them, nor are those who do not appreciate lawful for them. Return the dowries that were paid. (Sura 60:10)

The above is used to justify the interpretation for Sura 5:5 that states believing women are “no longer lawful” for their unbelieving husbands, when in fact it deals with female Muslim converts who fled to Medina where Muhammad and co had emigrated. The reason the women left was the same reason Muhammad and the early believers left, which was to escape persecution by the Meccan Arabs, whether husbands or strangers. Sura 60:10 was, if anything, a statement that commitment to GOD was greater than commitment to partner, family and tribe.

The adulterer will only marry an adulteress or one who is an idolatress. The adulteress, she will only be married to an adulterer or an idolater. This has been forbidden for the acknowledgers. (Sura 24:3)

Sura 24:3 is the sole exception offered by some scholars permitting Muslim women to freely marry outside of the deen i.e. only when she commits adultery (is this also applicable to males?). What an archaic and silly concept – why would anyone in their right mind even listen to it? Why are people today being governed by archaic laws dating back some 1400yrs prior that are only applicable to a certain people in a certain place at a certain time, not them? GOD has given each of us our own minds and we need to use them. Another point to mention is why do so many believers today seem incapable of applying their own reasoning, thinking their own way through these issues and trusting to their own common sense? It's alarming. Yes, there may well be various answers to this question but one of them most definitely would be the fear of family, mosque and the very ummah mentioned earlier. Remember: you don't question, you don't doubt, you give up responsibility for your own mind and your own faith-journey to clerics and you put your head down and robotically obey. Is that really submission to a GOD of love? Is that even remotely realistic? Muslims are so concerned about what “Islam” teaches yet “Islam” doesn't teach anything because it's not a living, breathing and sentient being like you and I. Rather it is the clergy and their *de facto* rule of the deen that sets out what the ummah is to do, which is an excellent reason for never being part of the ummah if that's what it's like. When the clergy steal the freedom of believers they conceal the Truth from them: each of us is free to date or marry whomever we wish and this has nothing to do with clergy but you and GOD.

PART V: *The four prophets*

The most influential messengers within the Abrahamic faiths are Musa, Isa Masih and Muhammad and of course Abraham, peace be upon them all. Abraham is believed by Jews and Christians to have responded to the call to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah (a repulsive idea in our belief-system) whereas Muslims believe it was his son Ismail who was sacrificed. Ironically and many centuries later, Isa Masih was also believed “sacrificed” on Golgotha, which is the northern summit of Mt. Moriah, hence why some see the sacrifice of Abraham’s son being a precursor for Jesus Christ as sacrifice (which goes some way towards explaining the Muslim belief another took Isa Masih’s place just like a lamb/goat was on hand to take the place of Abraham’s “son”). Monotheism according to the Islamic deen actually dates back to Adam who is part of the creation myth incorporating the Garden of Eden, which we don’t literally believe in but see as an archetype, not just for emerging humanity but our aspiring spiritualism too. As an early attempt to explain the dichotomy between good and evil, the Garden story actually provides an important narrative and reasonable coverage (in Egyptian mythology which predates Judaism, the first created being was Atum, out of whom the first goddess – Tefnut – came, similar to Eve’s coming from Adam). What is most important about this though is the lineage it provides: Adam down to Abraham down to Moses down to King David down to Jesus Christ on down to Muhammad. Yes, other notable prophets exist between but the point is that the Garden of Eden myth links all these individuals, their deen and their descendants into one ongoing chain which provides validation and authenticity to their followers – even if these very same followers are at odds one with the other, let alone within their own systems. All four of these figures are that oxymoron of having the same monotheistic belief yet expressing it in very different ways and, just to confuse the issue further, through very different practices (if the historical accuracy and validity of our scriptural descriptions are to be believed).

Abraham (last name unknown)

Believed to have lived in the earlier part of the second millennium BCE, Abraham (which means “father of many nations”) is venerated as a patriarchal father figure by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Originally named Abram (which meant “noble father”) Abraham was the descendant of Noah’s son Shem and sired the Ishmaelites, Israelites, Midianites and Edomites. The accepted story is Abraham was called by GOD according to scripture to leave Ur of the Chaldees (usually identified as Babylon aka Iraq) to Canaan where he would father a multitude of many people. However, it may actually be due to his opposition to the state idolatry of the time that caused him to escape the persecution he most likely received for, as Josephus states in his book *The Antiquities of the Jews* chapter 7:1, Abraham was

“...a person of great sagacity, both for understanding all things and persuading his hearers, and not mistaken in his opinions; for which reason he began to have higher notions of virtue than others had, and he determined to renew and to change the opinion all men happened then to have concerning God; for he was the first that ventured to publish this notion, That there was but one God, the Creator of the universe; and that, as to other [gods], if they contributed anything to the happiness of men, that each of them afforded it only according to his appointment, and not by their own power.”

Nicholas of Damascus, Greek historian (64 BCE), in the fourth book of his *History* has this to say regarding Abraham:

“Abram reigned at Damascus, being a foreigner, who came with an army out of the land above Babylon, called the land of the Chaldeans: but, after a long time, he got him up, and removed from that country also, with his people, and went into the land then called the land of Canaan, but now the land of Judea, and this when his posterity were become a multitude; as to which posterity of his, we relate their history in another work. Now the name of Abram is even still famous in the country of Damascus; and there is shown a village named from him, The Habitation of Abram.”

Thus the notion of Abram and Sarai being part of a clan of simple herders-come-farmers is clearly not the case. Abram was a man of renown to have had such an army at his disposal (later on in Genesis we read how Abram used his forces to free his nephew Lot, when Lot and his people were taken captive by the Assyrians, which would have been a major confrontation at the time). Later on Abraham's entourage is described as a “multitude” too; clearly he was no simple herdsman but a chieftain in his own right with formidable resources – and forces – at his disposal. Now Genesis 11:30 says Sarai (who later became Sarah, Abraham's wife), was unable to conceive, which remained the case in Canaan and later on when they moved to Egypt due to the great famine in the land. It was at this point Abraham decided to pass Sarah off as his sister lest the Egyptians kill him for her, or so the Jewish texts read. Genesis 12:14-16 says:

When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels (emphasis ours).

According to scripture the Hebrew G-d then inflicted Pharaoh's household and when he realized Sarah was Abraham's wife he says in 12:19

Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!"

This is important: Pharaoh slept with Sarah, Abraham's wife, a point we will return to again and which Josephus elaborates further in *The Antiquities of the Jews* 8:1-2 that because of this event, Pharaoh

"...made him a large present in money, and gave him leave to enter into conversation with the most learned among the Egyptians; from which conversation his virtue and his reputation became more conspicuous than they had been before. For whereas the Egyptians were formerly addicted to different customs, and despised one another's sacred and accustomed rites, and were very angry one with another on that account, Abram conferred with each of them, and, confuting the reasoning's they made use of, every one for their own practices, demonstrated that such reasoning's were vain and void of truth: whereupon he was admired by them in those conferences as a very wise man, and one of great sagacity, when he discoursed on any subject he undertook; and this not only in understanding it, but in persuading other men also to assent to him. He communicated to them arithmetic, and delivered to them the science of astronomy; for before Abram came into Egypt they were unacquainted with those parts of learning; for that science came from the Chaldeans into Egypt and from thence to the Greeks also."

Who knows how long Abraham resided in Egypt for? The Bible makes it sound as if he promptly left after Sarah was returned but this is most certainly not true, not when the highest levels of Egyptian society are opened to him. Regardless, at some point Abraham and co move from Egypt with Pharaoh's recompense and Genesis 13 points out how wealthy Abraham had truly become. However, we believe Sarah had gotten pregnant to the unidentified Pharaoh and had *already bore his child* when they left (hence the elaborate gifts Abraham and Sarah received, not least an Egyptian hand-maiden to assist with. The notion that Hagar was a slave is ridiculous for Egypt was the ruling elite of the time and, seems as they were top of the social ladder, would never have sufficed an Egyptian slave for a foreign race even if it was Abraham). Time passes and if we move ahead to Genesis 16 we read:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

The above and its following verses is, we believe, a deliberate attempt by scribes to conceal the fact that Sarah's son – not Abraham's – was already somewhere around 10-12yrs old when Abraham slept with Hagar. It must also be kept in mind that the *Book of Genesis* was written many generations later through the eyes of the pro-Persian Hebrew scribes (after all, it was the Persian king Artaxerxes who permitted Nehemiah to lead a delegation to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, with Israel becoming a buffer state between it and Egypt), whereby the very term "Egypt" had become a metaphor for all manner of evil. The idea that Sarah had gotten pregnant to Pharaoh and *already had his child* was too distasteful thus to say Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to sire a descendant from was more palatable, but here's the catch: Sarah's son to Pharaoh (which scripture says was Ismail) was in fact *Isaac*. We believe the writers switched the

two around. Ismail, derived from the Hebrew *yishma'el* or “God hears” was Abraham's actual son. Quite possibly it was on Abraham's own initiative, not Sarah's, that he decided to conceive a child with Hagar, as having Isaac as an heir when Isaac was not his own son would have been a source of great discontent. In fact, we read about this in Genesis 17:18 when Abraham cries out to GOD saying, *If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!* Why would Abraham say such a thing? Because Ismail is Abraham's real son, not Isaac, even though both came from the same mother: it was through Ismael Abraham wished to see the Lord's promises regarding his own descendants fulfilled, taking into account that these historical narratives are Hebrew legends. It's extremely unlikely they are verbatim events (incidentally, this does not mean Abraham doubted the Lord's promises regarding Isaac, rather that he wanted his own son to inherit the possessions and position he held). However, GOD does not turn his back on Hagar and Ismail but goes on to say:

I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count (Genesis 16:1)

You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your misery. He will be a donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand will be against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers (Genesis 16:11-12)

And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation (Genesis 17:2)

It is at this point in Genesis 17 that GOD then says:

No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father to many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you ...the whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants...This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Circumcision is a distinctly Egyptian practice reserved for priests but there's more: Genesis 17 says

As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of people will come from her...your wife will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him

So we see two covenants: one between Abraham and his descendants confirmed via circumcision and another between Isaac and Sarah. Abraham was 99yrs old and “Ismail” 13yrs old when they were both circumcised, with Isaac being born the following year. Turn this around and you'll see 13yrs of age fits what Isaac should now be and in fact, it was Ismail being

born by Sarah's maidservant, the Egyptian nurse provided by the unnamed Pharaoh to assist with his own child. Despite the authors of the Tanakh switching Isaac and Ismail around and trying to create a clean break with the arrival of "Isaac", we read Ismail was aware of being the rightful heir of Abraham because, again according to scripture, he mocked his brother. To be able to do so Ismail must have been a precocious child aware of his birthright whose attitude became apparent to such a degree that Sarah says:

Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share the inheritance with my son Isaac (Genesis 21:10)

Note the language employed by Sarah i.e. my son not "our son", a subtle clue to his different father. We read ahead in verse 11:

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son

Again, we see the language employed by Abraham i.e. his son not "their son". By now Isaac would have been a young man, and presumably Sarah would have made plans for him already. What's more, just because it's not recorded doesn't mean Sarah was not in contact with Pharaoh (as Abraham would have had an extensive network from Canaan to Egypt) or that the Pharaoh in question was unaware of his son's ongoing development. However, GOD says to Abraham,

Do not be distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to what Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring

We cannot imagine Abraham's frame of mind, yet despite it all he heeds Sarah's advice and sends his own son away? Not very likely, and certainly not in a patriarchal culture but then, Abraham was a submitter and had the One actually said this, would have obeyed. Chapter 21 tells us Ismail lived in the desert, became an archer and ironically, married an Egyptian. Possibly the fact that Abraham remarried after the death of Sarah to a woman named Keturah who bore him six sons (one of whom was Midian, father of the Midianites) alleviated his suffering and loss regarding Ismail, but we cannot assume he simply stopped contact with him. Regardless, we do not hear of Ismail again till both he and Isaac bury their father Abraham, at which point we read Ismail had twelve sons who were the twelve tribal rulers according to their settlements and camps (Genesis 25:13-16) as indeed, Isaac was to father Jacob whose 12-sons became Israel. Thus it is through Ismail, Abraham's son, Arabs trace their lineage to Abraham and whilst the Hebrews did the same, their patriarch was Pharaoh – most likely Tuthmosis III – and not Abraham. This certainly casts a different light on Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac.

Lastly, if the above were not enough, when we read Genesis 20 we find Abraham and co moving to Gerar where yet again he passes Sarah off as his sister – this from an even more powerful Abraham, greatly enriched and more influential than ever whose abilities to equip a sizeable fighting force would have increased accordingly and who really had no need to do such a thing. Abimelech, king of Gerar, then takes Sarah for his wife in a repeat of Pharaoh's actions

replete with the same result: cursed by GOD. Abimelech dutifully returns Sarah to Abraham, offers sincere apologies all round, as well as a tidy recompense (1,000 shekels no less). Apart from the fact that Sarah was an old woman and kings like young, attractive concubines, this is a poor attempt to somehow validate the earlier story of Abraham passing Sarah off as his sister by repackaging it a second time. In a bid to convince the reader of this happening once before, the scribes responsible for Genesis (contrary to popular opinion the Tawrat was *not* written by Moses) actually undermine this by attempting to shore it up with a repeat of the same. Such an idea seems silly, particularly in light of Abraham's obvious character, thus it would be more realistic to say Sarah had an affair with "Pharaoh" and it was not till she became pregnant to him that Abraham grew aware of it and much later, Hebrew damage-control kicked in.

Moses (last name unknown)

In the Egyptian language (which was old Coptic before the Muslim conquests and their forcing Arabic on the Egyptian people) Moses' name meant "child" as in *Thutmose, the child of Tut*; thus Moses was the "child of" somebody – at least in an adoptive sense – lost to history (his Habiru father was Amram, the believed grandson of Levi, descendant of Moses). In Hebrew the name Moses can mean "the one who was drawn out" or "the one who draws out", which of course is applicable to the figure responsible for the Hebrew exodus, though one must wonder if this Biblical figure was given said name after the event (?). Moses was a known murderer (thus breaking the very Ten Commandments he received) who fled Egypt, returning years later as a pivotal figure within the Exodus myth. According to the Exodus tradition as laid out in the Tawrat, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to the promised land aka Canaan, wandering in the desert some forty years prior to arrival. Exodus 12:37 states:

There were about 600,000 men on foot, besides women and children. Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds.

Now if half of these men had a wife that would bring the total to 900,000 individuals. If half of those wives had one child, that would increase the total to 1,050,000 people (this is being conservative without even attempting to guess the numbers of the "many other people" who accompanied them). Interestingly, no historical records exist within the region of such a huge movement of people at any time ever, let alone any Egyptian records during, or what the economic and social costs Egypt would have incurred from such a seismic event. The sudden departure of over a million people is no small thing, particularly if these people are essentially slaves to whom the burden of all labor was enforced, if scripture is to be believed. Despite the fact no archaeological evidence exists to support any exodus whatsoever, none exists either for an upsurge of some million people (some estimate over 2,000,000 people) into Canaan during the 13th century BCE. What's more, such an enormous populace would leave traces down to the present of burial grounds, building implements, skeletal remains both human and animal, jewelry, pottery shards etc. yet nothing has ever been found.

Returning to the 40yrs in the wilderness, one must consider if not accept the fact that the Sinai would have been unable to support such a large amount of people to start with, particularly as it has no rivers and receives on average 4 inches of rainfall per year. Such a lack

of water over the Sinai's 60,000 km square wouldn't be adequate to water the herds and flocks of 1,050,000 moving people for a 10-yr period let alone 40. Furthermore, no Egyptian records exist of the various plagues said to have been brought by Moses against Pharaoh and Egypt in fact, no historical records exist at all (bar the Jewish Tanakh) that a sizable portion of Hebrews ever resided in Egypt (if at all) as per the Exodus legends. To make matters more interesting, some 14-mountains have now been claimed as the Biblical Mt. Sinai ranging from locations in the Sinai peninsula across to modern-day Saudi Arabia. This is a nice way of admitting no-one actually knows which Mt. Sinai is the right Mt. Sinai and thus far, none have revealed any archaeological evidence of such an enormous encampment of people about it (Jebel Musa in the south of the Sinai Peninsula is the preferred choice as Mt. Sinai though no evidence of the Exodus has been found there either). Furthermore, Exodus 14:2 says:

Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.

Which sea is specified no-one knows; is it the Gulf of Suez, the Gulf of Aqaba or the Red Sea proper? Regardless, the word "sea" employed can also refer to the papyrus reed marshes, which makes one pause in regards to Pharaoh chasing the Israelites. Though the Exodus story utilizes a few names derived from Egyptian history and geography such as the Red Sea, the river Shihor (Jos 13:3), and Raamses, this falls far short of proving the historicity of Exodus. The Exodus story gives several clues to a late 7th, early 6th century authorship due to the fact that Israel's alleged home in Egypt, the fabled "land of Goshen" is a name derived from Geshem, a 5th century Qedarite royal family name, not Bronze Age Egypt. The Exodus writer gives no name of any Pharaoh at the alleged time of Joseph or Moses, an astonishing oversight which would have been included had these historical events been factual; the avoidance of the names of kings or pharaohs suggests the objective here is actually something less than an accounting of datable, historical fact. The Exodus writer does however name the "Philistines" stating God would "not lead them through the land of the Philistines" (Ex 13:17), yet archaeologists have determined the Philistines did not begin to appear in Canaan until the late 13th century i.e. at a much later period, and did not establish themselves governmentally until the 10th century BCE. The Exodus writer also appears ignorant of the Egyptian forts in northern Sinai or the Egyptian strongholds in Canaan, especially in the 15th to 13th century BCE when Egypt became the dominant power of the Middle East.

There's more: the possibility also exists Moses was none other than Amenhotep IV, the grandson of Joseph, the same sold into slavery by his brothers. As explained and researched by Ahmed Osman in his book *The House of the Messiah* pg. 59, Joseph is believed to be Yuya, the same who served as minister to Pharaoh Tuthmosis IV (1413-1405 BCE) and his successor, Amenhotep III. The same prince who became Amenhotep III married Yuya's daughter Tiye and, when his father died, also married his sister Sitamun to inherit the throne as was the Egyptian custom (strange though such incestuous ties appear to us today). However, Amenhotep made Tiye his Royal Wife, not Sitamun. Tiye bore two children: the first was her son Tuthmosis who disappeared in mysterious circumstances and the second was to become Amenhotep (Moses). Osman points out that Moses was born "at the fortified frontier city of Zarw on the eastern boundaries of Egypt proper. Zarw had been presented to Tiye by the king as a kind of summer

palace where she could be near to her Israelite relations, who had been allowed to settle at Goshen in the Eastern Delta, rather than Egypt itself because Asiatic shepherds had become anathema to Egyptians since the successful invasion of Egypt by the Hyksos in the 7th century BCE." The king had given instructions that should Tiye's next child (shortly to be Amenhotep or Moses) be a boy, he was to put to death because Tiye was not the legitimate heiress and was of mixed Egyptian/Hebrew blood. Those attending the queen did not heed the king's instructions but helped send Moses across the water to the queen's relations. This sending across the water could be the basis of the baby-Moses-in-the-bulrushes story which is the story of Sargon of Akkad, the first regional conqueror, who had lived more than a thousand years *before* Moses. The story of how he was set adrift in a basket on the River Euphrates was inscribed on an Akkadian Stela which bears repeating here:

My mother was a priestess whom no man should have known. She brought me into the world secretly.... She took a basket of reeds, placed me inside it, covered it with pitch and placed me in the River Euphrates. And the river, without which the land cannot live, carried me through part of my future kingdom. The river did not rise over me, but carried me high and bore me along to Akki who fetched water to irrigate the fields. Akki made a gardener of me. In the garden that I cultivated, Inane (the great goddess) saw me. She took me to Kish to the court of King Urzabala. There I called myself Sargon, that is, the rightful king.

Moses reputedly went on to meet GOD in person atop Mt. Sinai, returning from this meeting twice with two different sets of what are now heralded as the Ten Commandments (refer Exodus 20 and 34 for verification). The term "Mosaic Law" derives from him, commonly referred to as "the Law" by New Testament writers; Moses is heralded as the Law-giver in the Jewish faith and is its most pivotal figure, considered to be the greatest of the prophets.

Jesus (last name unknown)

"Jesus" is an English translation from the Greek *Iesous*, translated from the Hebrew *Yeshua* aka "Joshua". Some believe the earlier Joshua of the *Book of Joshua* (which, incidentally, many scholars now discount as pure fiction), is a precursor for the second Joshua aka Jesus Christ. The Essene community – believed responsible for maintaining and storing the Dead Sea scrolls of Qumran fame – are said to believe the reason GOD sent a plague against the Israelites in Numbers 25 wasn't because of Baal worship or relations with the surrounding, non-Israelite tribes (in fact the father-in-law of Moses was a Midianite) but because Joshua, the first Jesus, had been killed by Phineas the priest. The Essenes believed it was this murder that produced the plague and which Biblical scribes intentionally reversed i.e. the plague was ended by said murder. Regardless, Muslims know Jesus as Isa Masih or Jesus the Messiah, whilst the term "Christ" is yet another literal translation from Greek *kristos* meaning "anointed" or "chosen", thus the term Christ is not a name inasmuch as it is a descriptor or title. As akonga we call Jesus *Sheikh Isa* and consider him not only our exemplar and master but the epitome of a Sufi, the greatest of the four prophets in that he drew no blood. Born a bastard cursed by GOD (Deuteronomy 23:2 states *if a person is illegitimate by birth, neither he nor his descendants for ten generations may be admitted to the assembly of the LORD*), he's believed to have been born

of a virgin, similar to Buddha who lived before him was believed born. Jesus never once claimed divinity but, upon his death and during the developmental years in Christian theology that followed, he became elevated to the literal son of GOD believed to have died for humanity's sin and intent on being a "personal lord and savior".

This occurred alongside of other innovations that were foreign to GOD's chosen people such as the Hebrew *sheol* being translated into the *hell* found in the Christian Bible – the same which is referred to as a place of torment, suffering and the like (the Levitical tradition along with today's Judaism describes *sheol* simply as "the grave" and maintains a purgatory concept where one is held a limited time prior to admission to paradise). *HaSatan* (or the Satan), the appointed tempter sent by GOD as per *The Book of Job*, now became "Satan" aka the devil, an evil fallen angel not part of Hebrew theology but intrinsic to Christianity's (the metaphorical serpent of the Garden of Eden fame was likened to this fallen angel by Christian theologians which has since become a pillar of their faith). Regardless of these and countless other surprises debate exists about the cause of Jesus' death for the Book of Acts states he was hung on a tree in 5:30, 10:29 and 13:29, also in Peter 2:24 (note that Deuteronomy 21:22-23 states *if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance*). Most of what we do know about Sheikh Isa is based upon what we don't know for example:

We don't know which of the synoptic gospels are accurate, if any.

We don't know if other, non-Biblical texts are equally accurate regarding Sheikh Isa (or more).

We don't know which of the recorded genealogies for Sheikh Isa are accurate (if any), or where he was even born. We do know it was imperative for the gospel writers to tie his birthplace to Bethlehem, as that was where King David was born, and would also act as a confirmation for prior scriptures believed to be foretelling Jesus (refer Micah 5:2 as an example for this).

We don't know if Sheikh Isa and John (the Baptist) were related or not, or if John was in fact the person who instructed the young Isa, this being based primarily on their same teachings (yet in Matthew 11:2 John doesn't recognize Isa and actually asks who he is; this not only contradicts the other gospels but the very idea of John baptizing Isa to start with after all, when John did so it's believed GOD spoke from the heavens – see Matthew 3:17).

We don't know who Sheikh Isa's father was or whether he was actually a carpenter; it is more likely "Joseph" never even existed and Mary's pregnancy was simply accidental.

We don't know when Sheikh Isa was really born.

We don't know where or how Sheikh Isa grew up: who taught him during his childhood? Where did he develop his teachings, views and beliefs (aspects of which have strong similarities with Hinduism and Buddhism)?

We don't know what language(s) Sheikh Isa spoke.

We don't know whether or not Sheikh Isa married or had children but it's highly likely (and it is entirely plausible that Mary Magdalene was his partner, perhaps wife).

We don't know what age *really* Sheikh Isa was when he first started his "mission" (or how long it lasted for exactly), or if in fact it was merely a continuation from yet another place, the words and deeds from that place not recorded for prosperity.

We don't know which of the many miraculous events attributed to Sheikh Isa really occurred, if any, for Science tells us dead people don't rise, humans can't walk on water, and that spit and mud rubbed onto the eyelids don't cure blindness etc. Thus if these things don't occur today, did they ever? We say no. Thus if the gospel writers are making this up, what else are they making up?

We don't know which places Sheikh Isa actually visited, if at all. His meanderings in ancient Israel seem rather haphazard.

We don't know how much reputedly said by Sheikh Isa actually was, particularly when we read passages of, say, Isa fasting alone in the desert or withdrawing alone to pray yet his "words" are still recorded: who was there to record them?

We don't know whether or not Sheikh Isa's words were recorded over various times and places then assembled *en masse*, or if they really were spoken in the times and places laid out by the writers (doubtful). Again, were times and places added to sayings attributed to the Sheikh to flesh out the stories and provide context?

We don't know when Sheikh Isa died or where i.e. he may not have been crucified-slash-hung but if he was, we don't know where he was buried (it is entirely possible his outburst at the temple during Passover saw him quietly taken out back and killed to stave off any possible chance of upsetting the priests/people).

We don't know what Sheikh Isa specifically did that warranted the death penalty in the first place, as the anti-Semitism of the gospel writers is more than apparent; for example, such fictitious scenes as the Jews "demanding" Isa be crucified when six days prior they were all welcoming him into Jerusalem with hosanna's and palm fronds, is hard to believe. What did he do to so suddenly lose the adoring masses? Surely the gospel writers would have thought to have told us that.

We don't know who Sheikh Isa really was or why St. Paul was so obsessed with him.

Sheikh Isa wandered through Israel reiterating the teachings of John the Baptist and was believed to have performed miracles and healings; he gained a small following and was

believed to be in regular contact with the priests of the day who bounced their beliefs off him (this is extremely unlikely for what would the priesthood have to do with an itinerant Jewish mystic, a nobody, wandering about proclaiming the kingdom of heaven is at hand?). The Biblical events leading up to Sheikh Isa's death are doubtful, which confuses the resurrection idea; there are also those who believe Sheikh Isa wasn't killed but actually survived the attempt and lived out the rest of his life elsewhere (i.e. India nee Kashmir).

Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah (26 April 570 - 8 June 632)

Muhammad first began having visions of the One whilst withdrawing to a cave atop Mt. Hira outside of Mecca, a meditative practice he regularly performed, from which developed his awareness of GOD-slash-tawhid. From these humble beginnings, and Muhammad's teachings, developed the early Muslim community which ultimately left Mecca for Medina to escape persecution by the pagan Arabs. Muhammad developed an early code of better treatment for women unheard of in his time, as well as rules for war, inheritance, marriage etc. contrary to the then Bedouin culture. In time Muhammad won Mecca over without a fight and the Islamic deen became both a religious expression and a political movement locally, nationally then internationally through conversion, conquest and trade (to some degree economic prosperity and military superiority went hand in hand with the deen's, and were held to be indicative of GOD's blessing). After Muhammad's death, divisions and sectarianism arose, many of which are still ongoing today and of the four, only Muhammad is clearly documented in recent history.

PART VI: *Measuring religious worth*

What do we see from the previous section? A man who reaps enormous reward through deception, including great riches and access to the highest echelons of Pharaoh's state, at least according to Hebrew "scripture"; a murderer and probable follower of Akhenaten who returns to the country of his origin perhaps to reinstate himself or at least lead out the few remaining monotheists, now eulogized as the Hebrew exodus; a bastard mystic calling for repentance and proclaiming the kingdom of heaven is at hand and who apparently loses his life because of this (or was it for the money-lender incident at the temple?); lastly, we see an Arab businessman drawn into prophet hood during which time he's said to have married a 6yr-old, something that sits in the craw as being anathema for any man of GOD. So we see a series of individuals with everything from glaring faults to criminal behaviors *somewhat* drawn by *some* aspect of the One to perform *some* task(s) at *some* historical point in time for *some* purpose. This is certainly one valid view out of many, yet these are the "facts" according to scripture both Muslim and non (along with accepted hadith). Do we believe the above things about these individuals? Not particularly, hadith least of all, but we value the message over and above the messengers who, as can be seen were cursed in some way either through behavior, birth or action even as we believe much of their message since distorted, fictionalized and made-up. Yet the examples of these four show us that imperfect people are consistently drawn to GOD to produce world-changing outcomes that far outlast them, which is hope-full. Was it worth it for them? Were their lives the measure they hoped they would be, if in fact they hoped such a thing? And is the example of their lives whether opinions, revelations, teachings or instructions still worth it for us today here in the West?

We measure religion internally and externally: internally via the expectations of fellow believers one upon another and externally by the effects of our deen on the world. Much of how both are viewed is strongly dependent upon who one is, what one believes and even such things as gender and cultural background, to name but a few influences. The opinion of a 68yr-old Kurdish male in the ongoing civil war currently wracking Syria will differ from the opinion of a 19yr-old Persian girl even if both long for freedom in every sense of the word (including the GOD-given right to reject the Islamic deen). Yet the Kurdish elder, even amidst the social unrest and violence could still say that yes, his faith is still very much worth it, that in the few times of quiet stolen from the world around him today it is where he returns to regather himself and recoup his equilibrium. The young Persian girl with her nail-polish, ipod and Youtube playlist in her male-ruled, clergy-dominated domain where her and millions of others younger and older are one and all desperate and impatient for democratic freedoms (as created by them, not external forces that so casually lump ALL Persians into one impersonal box) could still say that yes, her faith is still very much worth it, because she honestly believes in an altruistic GOD who were deliver her nation from the bondage of religion. This is how religion is to be measured and

not by the propagation of the deen, not by the establishment of archaic shariah, not by “Islamism” whereby anti-democratic fundamentalists will use any means to dominate fellow Muslims and non-believers alike, not by building more mosques or the creation of yet another oppressive Islamic state (note ALL religious states in positions of power were/are oppressive. It is simply an erroneous assumption that religious rule is better than secular, the proof of which can be seen in the world today and the history books. The reason we evolved away from the rule of the religious is in our view ordained by Allah in refutation of religious rule).

The roles yours or my deen plays in the still, quiet moments or the times of anguish and despair we suffer through, are vitally important to us. This can be further simplified to *the way we respond to GOD* is vitally important to us. Note this response isn’t “religious” but rather it’s natural, organic and innate to us for it’s the outpouring of our soul, raw and unpasteurized. Yes, it can be expressed through religious ritual but the bulk of religious rituals are not monopolized by any one religion. Prayer is an example of this: who can possibly say that their religion has a monopoly on prayer? The likes of fasting, worship, ritualized prayer, charity and pilgrimage are further examples that co-exist in many of the world’s faiths (and which existed before the Islamic deen). Where does the line between our religious responses and our natural, human responses exist in regards to divinity, or is it ever-shifting in our current clime? Because far too often we confuse the two and convince ourselves that deen initiates, leads and guides our responses but *deen doesn’t exist*. It is a system man hath made, not a self-perpetuating reality; to say deen exists is to say democracy exists but it doesn’t. Democracy only ever exists when you and I, human beings, initiate democratic norms and act upon them. In other words, deen only exists when you and I act upon human words, human thoughts, human texts and human systems. This is humanity *doing*. There is no religion there is only humanity. To serve religion is ridiculous: its entire purpose for existence is to serve us and to serve us via aiding our journey towards the Living GOD. Without us there is no religion (or democracy) and we intuitively know Allah doesn’t need religion to be known by or known through, which is why Sufi o te Tahi refer to our beliefs as a practice i.e. something we do in thought and deed.

There is nothing innately wrong with religion we just need to remember its role, which is why any attempt to govern a people, society or state through religious rule will always fail. In fact it is destined to fail because religion is not a democratic set up but a theocratic set up, whereby governance is via the “divinely-guided”, who naturally the hoi poloi cannot question for to do so is to question God. This is stupid and provides a superb setting for exploitation and corruption, which of course it has consistently done. Religion, by its very own premise, is meant to *serve* not rule, thus any time it is used outside of said purpose it is already corrupted. So if the religion(s) that have come down to us through Muhammad, Jesus or Moses don’t serve our spiritual journey, we don’t dispense with our journeys; instead we dispense with our religion either modifying it or simply rejecting it outright, and to GOD we are resigned. As mentioned before, religion exists for us not we for it, and when it no longer helps us towards the Divine then it has played its part (if indeed it played any part at all). Hence why Sufi o te Tahi call ourselves submitters but not to the Islamic deen or even the practice, but to fitra i.e. that which is eternal Being innate in all. Thus to measure the worth of religion we must honestly and openly ask whether it has been beneficial, to what degree and how to improve upon it? These are not questions for the ulema but for all Muslims everywhere, for surrendering responsibility

for our surrender in the first place isn't surrender but laziness; it shows to a definite degree how little we value the One when we neglect our duty in this.

Thus when reflecting upon tawhid it is what we make of our faith *individually* and how we display this to others that matters, as you and I live in the present. We cannot and should not measure ourselves by the four-mentioned prophets but by our own actions, our own beliefs and our own behaviors in our own time and in our own place. We could argue all we like about the integrity of these four prophets (or lack of) or any other prophets for that matter, but what's the point? They lived then, we live now; they're dead whilst we have evolved *from* their original revelations which in turn have evolved *beyond* them. They are no longer essential to the faith tradition that originally began with them as individuals, whether they wish it so or not. Each played their part in an ongoing narrative as do we and it's important to remember this: each of us is party to a religious system individually or collectively, and it is our duty to continue this, *not* someone else's. Many come to the One, attend a place of worship or teaching then essentially stop there: that's as far as they go, thinking mind turned off. They've thrown their individual journey into a collective pot irrespective of whether or not this will improve them or calcify them, release them or retain them indefinitely, help achieve independent wholeness or an ongoing, dependent fragmentation. In any spiritual practice the goal is not the practice but to transcend *all* practices through enlightenment and one's own divinity. We cannot and should not shrug off our own responsibility for our own spiritual development onto another: they are responsible for their development and we for our own, thus the buck always stops with us.

Now the four-mentioned prophets adhered to the same monotheism but expressed it differently as per their historical place, time and own personalities. A religion of sorts originated from each or at least, a religion originated from their teachings and continues still in various formats, but their purpose as individuals was not religion: their purpose was to follow the One through-out the course of their lives. Further, their teachings and/or personal revelations have been transcribed into sacred text's called scripture and, despite how much or how little of said scripture is attributable to any, scripture *per se* was not their purpose either; if anything, scripture was a by-product from their life-times. Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad did not live so as to figure in anyone's sacred writings and we need to remember this. We are so enraptured by our prophets, teachers and leaders we forget that it is to Allah we owe our allegiance and not our prophets, teachers and leaders and most certainly not any religion for that matter. Neither religion nor scripture continues through the worlds – only you and I or, to be more precise, our consciousness (you may prefer the term "spirit" or soul). Neither religion nor scripture redeems us but the Divine alone; as anyone on the *tariqat* will tell you, every journey outward returns inward, and every search through returns back to from. We are people of heart, people of *Islam* = *surrender to GOD* alone not prophet, teacher and leader. Yes, even though we draw from many prophets, teachers and leaders it is the desire of all true prophets, teachers and leaders for their disciples to surpass them. In retrospect, the best teacher is the one who having taught you all they know, realizes they have nothing more to teach and send you out to instruct others. This we call discipleship.

To recap, the worth of any religious system is not in its historical founders but in its present practitioners, you and I, and all religious systems must evolve and adapt both to their practitioners and with their practitioners, not vice versa. We must not forget the purpose of religion(s) is to act as a vehicle transporting the novice closer to GOD, not towards worshipping

the vehicle. Islam as submission to GOD will never stop, never fade, never pass away but deen is another matter entirely. Again, we are not interested in the Islamic deen inasmuch as we are interested in the Truth; this is a right Muslim attitude for all to have. If everyone Muslim turned their back on the Islamic deen this very day they would not suddenly stop being Muslim, would not suddenly stop being submitters: they would just no longer be following the Islamic deen. So what we must develop is balance between deen and individual response, for religious systems are notorious for being “closed-systems” and closed to many things including truth, love and integrity. Individual response to the quickening of Allah, to the sense of otherness, of profound love and *knowing* is always genuine and sincere thus religious systems can serve us by helping us focus our response to GOD – not control it, not claim ownership over it nor reserve the right to judge it or others when they claim their GOD-given independence from religion. Below is a common statement that could be found on practically any Muslim site (and in fact was):

Islam is a complete way of life. It tells man about the purpose of his creation and existence, his ultimate destiny, his place among other creatures and more importantly, it provides him with guidance to lead a balanced and purposeful life which will enable him to avoid the Hell-fire and be rewarded with a place in Paradise in the life after death.

This is pathetic: “Islam” does these things now? Since when did the Islamic deen or any deen for that matter, have the ability to do these things? We say never: this is the Divine’s work not religion. The Islamic deen-slash-system may be a complete way of life (or death, depending upon your personal views) but *Islam = surrender to GOD* isn’t because it already is complete in and of itself. There is nothing to add to it or subtract from it for all good things come by it. It is Life itself, the presence of fitra. Fitra is its own purpose and exists in us, for us, and as such is us and we it. There is no destiny to fitra: it is the destiny, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Fitra is the endless circle forever bubbling in all things and already is balanced; it is its own purpose and thus, so are we *if we become aware of GOD in us and allow the recovery due process*. As for hell-fire, this as nothing more than a metaphor (refer prior chapter) and not necessarily something to avoid but rather something to grow through and develop from, for when we abide in the Father and the Father abides in us, not even hell-fire is threatening but becomes just another stage, another evolution. As for death, there are many deaths including the death of physical form and really, the only generic “death” is the one brought on by the individual themselves, not the Divine. Thus being released in fitra, through fitra, by fitra to your fitra is paradise already such that the death of the physical-slash-thinking self has little bearing upon this. The paradise we approach is in us already; the heaven we want is in us already; the journey out returns us in and the journey towards ends back at its from and GOD is greater.

PART VII: Women in Islam

Through fitra all are equal irrespective of ethnicity, gender, religion, caste or sexual persuasion and the treatment of women in the deen today is an excellent starting point to measure the deen by. Before doing so we need to recall that historically around the world men and women have always played clearly defined roles as per their evolutionary development, so it should come as no surprise that the rise of religious thinking should not only mirror this, but actually entrench it. America did not grant women the right to vote – even though its very own constitution reiterated the equality of ALL people – till 1930 in fact Alice Paul, its leading light for female suffrage, was not only despised by males and females alike, was not only set upon by male mobs, was not only beaten by her own police force, was not only on continual picket duty outside the White House but was arrested, placed in solitary confinement and even sent to an insane asylum to get her to shut up and go away (she is virtually unknown today). This acts as a reminder to us all to be careful how quickly we point the finger when only 82yrs ago females in the world's greatest democracy were second-class citizens. Thomas Aquinas, one of the early Church "Fathers" and a paragon within any Christian seminary, grants us keen insight into early Christian views when he states in his *Summa Theologica*:

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even some external influence, like the south wind, for example, which is damp.

Laughable certainly, yet all too common back then but what's really frightening is that this archaic attitude is still common – and worse, still accepted – within far too many Muslim states, societies and communities still (Afghanistan is a case in question). Clement of Alexandra, another paragon from the early church era, proscribes a similar attitude towards our females in *The Instructor* (3.12) stating:

Let the woman observe this, further. Let her be entirely covered, unless she happens to be at home. For that style of dress is grave, and protects from being gazed at. And she will never fall, who puts before her eyes modesty, and her shawl; nor will she invite another to fall into sin by uncovering her face. For this is the wish of the Word, since it is becoming for her to pray veiled.

Note how if the woman covers herself she will prevent males from any "fall into sin", a very Islamic, blame-shifting view today in fact, so-called "Islamic" views and culturally-accepted norms for female dress are clearer reading the above nonsense. Such ridiculous views were and

are adopted *en masse* as an Islamic norm (even taken further in the practice known as *purdah*), though we would refer to these views as a cultural practice even if many Muslims support it. When we turn to the Tanakh and examine Mosaic Law, we discover a proliferation of similar verses that enact these same male, misogynist views such as:

Genesis 3:16 "...thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

Exodus 21:7: "And if a man sell his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the menservants do."

Exodus 22:16-17 deals with the case of a man who seduces a virgin. This was viewed as a property offense against the woman's father. The woman was expected to marry the seducer. If her father refused to transfer ownership of his daughter to the seducer, the latter was required to pay money to her father. The money would be in compensation for the damage to the father's property - his daughter. It would be difficult for a non-virgin to marry.

The comments by Aquinas, Clement and from the Tawrat show an ongoing patriarchal attitude whose misogynist opinion of females was culturally ingrained (clearly the early Church Fathers had little empathy or understanding of Sheikh Isa's teachings). Clement's comments that a women covering up protects herself from being gazed at is simply a transposing of guilt from males to females: instead of males having to control their gaze/themselves, women need to cover up or in other words, it's the women's fault for not having covered up in the first place that makes us gaze and causes male transgression. This infantile reasoning from such learned individuals shows the difference between theology and wisdom, yet is held by many males (and not just those of any particular religious persuasion) as a valid view. For its part, the Quran says:

Tell the acknowledging men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts, for that is purer for them. God is fully aware of what you do (Sura 24:30).

Tell the acknowledging women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts, and that they should not show off their attraction except what is apparent, and let them cast their clothes over their cleavage (Sura 24:31).

In the Quran both males and females are instructed to A) control their eyes and B) cover their bodies appropriately – it's not an IQ test to realize this makes more sense, for women are not the honor of men but rather *we as males honor women* when we treat them with respect. It is this very notion that somehow women actually are the honor of men that leads to brutal honor-killings and their like. The infamous case in Pakistan concerning the condoned rape of Mukhtar Mai in 2002 is testimony to this: her brother is sodomized by local tribesman, which should of seen them arrested and shot but didn't so, to cover their acts, these perverse men accuse the 12yr-old boy of flirting with one of their female relations, a woman in her 20s no less, so the boy is taken into police custody (why the boy and not the tribesmen?). To "cure" the tension in the village, Mukhtar is gang-raped as directed by the village elders (Muslims one and all), something the police politely ignore as the clan doing the raping are large, armed, rich

and a warrior caste, an act that would have appalled Muhammad. To top it off, when the boy's father tries to get his son back the police demand a bribe, forcing Mukhtar's father to go round to friends and relatives to raise funds: that's just to get his own son, a victim here, back from custody, something the court also "overlooked" (incidentally, the very men who raped Mukhtar were all released by these corrupt, male-orientated courts). These tragic events personify the blame women accrue simply by the male refusal – not their inability but their *refusal* – to be men of GOD. Instead they wish to remain infantile, insatiable, violent and oppressive and it helps immensely when the state religion is 100% on their side. What a shame on our Pakistani family these vile men are!

Let's take a step across from the treatment of women towards the scriptural treatment of adultery because the adulteress looms large in both Hebrew and Arab culture and religious belief (King Solomon seemed almost impressed by what an adulteress could achieve if *Song of Songs* is anything to go by). Adultery was and is viewed as undermining the core unit of any given society i.e. the family, let alone its ultimate betrayal to the patriarchal culture of the time. Men of course could have extra-marital adventures but the female was expected to stay home, stay the course, and essentially live up to her feminine role as caregiver – not explore what we as men were doing and certainly not imbibe of that reserved strictly for the male domain.

In Leviticus 18:20 adultery was defined as a man having sexual intercourse with his neighbor's wife. "Moreover thou shalt not lie carnally with thy neighbor's wife, to defile thyself with her." Leviticus 20:10 "And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." Deuteronomy 22:23 extends this prohibition to a man sleeping with a woman who is engaged to be married. If a man has an affair with an unmarried woman, the act is not considered adultery. Married men were free to visit prostitutes. A man who committed adultery did not commit a wrongful act against his own wife, but rather against his male neighbor.

Reading the above, do you think the Hebrew G-d allowed married women affairs with any unmarried men or male prostitutes they ventured across? No, he didn't (of course). Why then are married men able to sleep with unmarried women/prostitutes but married women can't? Why is it married men get away with such behavior but if a married women were to do the same, she would be accused of adultery? Again, it's ridiculous. No clearer evidence of men writing from a place and time in history where the poor treatment of females was an accepted social norm, one given a Godly "rubber-stamp" to justify and promote it, is needed. Yet we note the few examples included from the Tawrat here are no longer followed by the Jewish people today, so why is that? Well, it's because these examples and many more besides are selfish, stupid and frankly unjust. So what does that tell us, that GOD was inhumane once upon a time then "softened" over the ages dealing with we pesky humans? No, what it tells us is that people have changed over time – scripture can't, it's a done deal set in writing – by treating women better or to paraphrase Buddha (and later, Sheikh Isa), by treating others how we'd like to be treated. We grew up and progressed beyond mere scriptural limitations by which to define our social interactions by, and are better off for it. Scripture does not define us: we define scripture and in this case, for the better.

So scripture which is done and dusted will always remain as it currently is whilst you and I, our descendants and their descendants after them, will not stay the same in terms of beliefs – these will move away from their current locales and into new areas for “religion” is its own living entity. Interpretation of our scriptures will evolve and expand, leaving much of what is accepted today behind if not regulating the majority of scripture to its own historical context. Religion will undergo a further metamorphous not just because of time-frames and extenuating circumstances but also because *humanity* makes religion therefore religion will change: when we compare the deen's of today with their original beginnings they've changed in opinion, attitude, practice and application already. Who knows how far or how long this will continue, for no religion has remained the same since its inception and thus, we can accurately say neither will ours. A whole sleuth of developments now challenging the Islamic deen have literally “forced open” the doors of religion, developments such as new scientific discoveries and evidences; individualism and human rights; entertainment and the voices of our LGBT communities; minorities and the legacies of historic injustices; transparent justice systems and democratic governance; rational logic and neo-relativism; separation of church and state; freedom of expression and politics; the global economy and its wealth disparity; the rise of the middle class and lawlessness; the degradation of our environments and global warming; communication technologies and higher education; cultural diversity and the assimilation of new ideas; the internet and media; conquest and war; population growth and intermarriage the list goes on, each of which asks what we have to say and just how, exactly, our faiths can stay relevant towards any of these.

Thus to say scripture is from GOD is simply not true, not when we read such ungodly verses as included here which promote ungodly attitudes and acts: if that's the GOD you believe in, then we believe in different gods (and we lovingly resist yours). Many of today's believing historians, theologians and apologists explain away such passages at odds with our understanding of GOD today as simply belonging to a place and time whereby such behavior was accepted, which seems reasonable on the face of it. However, time is not part of reality, it is an aspect of consciousness and don't you and I believe GOD is the same yesterday, today and forever? If GOD is outside of time then the specious argument that certain behaviors, laws and attitudes which were once permissible as stated by scripture are now not permissible rings hollow. If GOD is unchanging then so are the laws of the One irrespective of time and this reasoning can be measured to all sacred writings. Further in the Tanakh we read:

*They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
Like clothing you will change them
and they will be discarded.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end
(Psalm 102:26-27)*

*God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?
(Numbers 23:19)*

*I the LORD do not change
(Malachi 3:6)*

So we either permit what our scriptures teach and follow whatever is proscribed (**Bible**: permits slavery, allows men to have wives and concubines, instructs stoning rebellious children, killing homosexuals, marrying the girls we rape etc \\ **Quran**: permits beating your wife(s), the hands of thieves should be cut off, non-believers should pay *jizyah* etc.) or we don't and if we don't, we don't because we intuitively understand such passages aren't just simply "archaic" or "belong to another time and place", but are actually anti-GOD. So if the very Word of GOD is clearly anti-GOD then doesn't it make sense to at least admit either A) large parts of our scriptures are man-made and corrupted or B) scripture is entirely man-made and not the verbatim words of GOD at all (as you know, we support the latter). Which of course opens up all scripture to similar criticism right across the board and so it should; the sooner we do this, the sooner we examine and critique "scripture", then the sooner we can liberate people from the religious lies our forebears have consistently used to inspire fear, to maintain control and to enforce social injustices (such as male dominance). How disgusting to use the Beloved's names for such things and for so many thousands of years! So what does Christianity say about these same subject? What does this "new testament" offer in place of?

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery;' but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.
(Matthew 5:27-28)*

*He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife, and marries another, commits adultery against her. If a woman herself divorces her husband, and marries another, she commits adultery."
(Mark 10:11-12)*

Everyone who divorces his wife, and marries another, commits adultery. He who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

Or don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers... (1 Corinthians 6:9)

Further, when we recall the story of the adulteress brought before Isa Masih in John 8 of the Injeel, we recall the women's accusers dispersing till none were left. Let us pick up at the end of said story which continues as follows:

*Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"
"No one, sir," she said.
"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."*

Is the above story even true? Does it even matter? What it does show however is two very different views apparently by the same person, Jesus Christ: on the one hand condemning

adulterers (Mark & Luke) whilst on the other hand forgiving them (John). Choose which appeals to you. However, to discuss some of the passages included here, we know that marrying a divorced woman isn't adultery: it's marrying a divorced woman. What's more, many people who have left abusive and dangerous relationships – or simply deeply unhealthy relationships – have been fortunate enough to go on and enjoy richly satisfying marriages with new partners. We call this redemption whilst Mosaic law proscribes stoning. Now if Isa Masih ignored Mosaic law and turned it on its head by *not* stoning the woman but worse, forgiving her, what does this tell us? It tells us these laws are not from GOD who is unchanging (Malachi 3:6), or that Jesus ignored Mosaic Law (and if so, why?). Further to this, does God *really* believe you commit adultery with women if you lust over them? If so, where does that leave a husband lusting for his wife or a wife her husband? Or is it more likely you commit adultery when you actually, well, actually do commit adultery? *Think*.

In the culture of the day to which Matthew 5:27-28 has been addressed, is not such a statement as recorded here actually an affront to the prevalent male chauvinism of that time? And, knowing the affinity Sheikh Isa had with women is it not likely that this attack upon male attitudes is actually the real reason for such a bold statement? *Think*. Aren't the passages from both Mark and Luke both nonsensical without any social context or background to them, yet people base their lives on them? *Think*. 1 Corinthians 6:9 which lists adulterers not inheriting the kingdom of GOD is but one man's letter to Corinth which ended up being included within the very canon he himself read as a devout Jew: do you really think this was St. Paul's intention, to have his personal correspondence elevated to the level of "scripture" by his fellow man? *Think* (actually it doesn't matter what Paul wanted because this is exactly what the church did anyway). Let's examine some Quranic passages regarding adultery too:

(2) The adulteress and the adulterer, you shall lash each of them one hundred lashes, and do not let any pity take you over God's system if you acknowledge God and the Last Day. Let a group of the acknowledgers witness their punishment.

(3) The adulterer will only marry an adulteress or one who is an idolatress. The adulteress, she will only be married to an adulterer or an idolater. This has been forbidden for the acknowledgers.

(4) Those who accuse the independent women and they do not bring forth four witnesses, then you shall lash them eighty lashes and do not ever accept their testimony. Those indeed are the evildoers;

(5) Except those who repent after this and do right, then God is Forgiving, Compassionate.

(6) Those who accuse their wives, but they have no witnesses except for themselves, then the testimony of one of them should be four testimony, swearing by God that he is being truthful.

(7) The fifth shall be God's curse upon him if he is one of those lying.

(8) The punishment will be averted from her if she testifies four times by God that he is of the liars.

(9) The fifth shall be that God's curse is upon her if he is speaking the truth.

Here we see that the person who commits adultery can remarry but only to another adulterer or an idolater, and that only after one hundred lashes. Not only is this outdated in its punishment and limitations (which says it's man-made because divinity is never outdated), but it's unnecessary today: if your partner betrays you, leave them. If you are the guilty party, then the other person either leaves you or forgives you (albeit most likely with conditions). However, was this GOD's revelation? Not likely, but at least it provided some framework for a difficult area of judgment at the time but what we need to remember is that adulterers can reform and remarry. Also, not all adultery is even based on sexual liaisons, though this can be an end result of. Sexual relations may be a stronger reason for why men stray, but often it's male vanity that leads to it: getting the attention of another female, especially if she's attractive, can and does seem exciting and challenging, especially if one is missing this in their life. For many women adultery can be more about emotional detachment from their husband than sexual fulfillment, thus finding that attachment with another person – male or female – can provide this. Further, it is not uncommon to seek solace elsewhere if you are ignored at home, patronized, regularly abused or simply left alone: does someone fitting this criteria *really* deserve to be lashed and forced only to marry an adulterer or an idolater? We say no. Thus we see notions of GOD which are exactly that, "notions", and overwhelmingly *male* notions passed off as divine law which is heralded as scripture.

CONCLUSION

Western Muslims need to understand that the wealth of our societies is not just that which can be readily seen such as roading, water/sewage treatment, continual electrical power, business opportunities, access to superb education, top-of-the-line medicare, public transport, transparency of civil government and the like but in our *thinking*. It is difficult to summarize our thinking but for want of better expressions it is always innovative, expressive, seeking, curious, intelligent, logical, expectant, alive and much, much more – all of which are supported by our communities and country as a whole. It's usually not till one visits other places that they fully appreciate the place they came from, the freedoms they have taken for granted, the immense wealth they've never really noticed but which is all around them every day. It is this thinking that has led us to establish the legal systems we have, the systems of governance we enjoy, the checks and balances in place from places of work to education to employment. For example simple things such as hardhat, boots and regular breaks do not exist on the majority of the world's construction sites today. Being able to enter politics as female from a different ethnic background (New Zealand had the first transsexual parliamentarian) is open to anyone in our country but not in large parts of the world. We place great emphasis on our children, on security, on the sanctity of all life, the fairness of our laws and in providing everyone with the same starting point here all of which are further examples of *how we think*. In effect, this way of thinking is, in our opinion, a godly attitude.

It never occurs to us that how we're thinking is ordained, meant to be or intended, least of all from a religious perspective, in our interaction with the world around us. It never occurs to us that what you and I enjoy today is ordained, meant to be or intended, least of all from a religious perspective either. We have become so accustomed to the notion that GOD-ideas are encompassed strictly by religious faith that we are incapable of even remotely considering our present technological, social and economic prosperity are themselves GOD-ideas, that the One can move outside of established religion and bless societies outside of faith institutions because A) GOD is not limited to nor constrained by history, scripture, religion or humanity and B) there is absolutely no religion with a monopoly on how to live, build, create, think or be. In other words, the Divine does not need religion to be known through or released by, thus in many regards today it is the *religious* who need to get off their high horses and both adopt and adapt to the thinking around them; it is the Abrahamic faiths that need to question why it is Western society has succeeded so well with their receding input (and why Islamic states are backwards). Thus for Western Muslims it is imperative that we maintain the blessings we've inherited and currently enjoy which means we need to maintain our *thinking* and not fall prey to reactionary or religious dogma. We need to be brave enough and wise enough to incorporate who we are as individuals along with where we come from in terms of national identity into our surrender.

At one point it was fairly common to hear complaints from certain sections of our Maori communities regarding the believed negative effects early missionaries had in New Zealand from banning indigenous beliefs to cultural norms and behaviors through to native dress. One of the most evident results from this was what some term the “Maori renaissance” through the late 80s into the mid-90s, a renaissance that was long overdue and proved to be immensely beneficial to the country as whole whereby Maori language and culture was rediscovered and supported. This is now the cry by many Western Muslims in regards to the heavily Arabized faith which is the Islamic deen today, along with its narrow focus and seeming inability to keep current and relevant in today’s inter-connected world, in many regards becoming a ritualistic monolith. We don’t want to attend mosques separating men and women; we don’t care if such thinking is labeled “Islamic” – it isn’t, it’s simply segregation masquerading under a religious title – we’re still not going to fall for it. We’re not interested in being told what to believe, we’re more interested in learning how to believe, and for many Westerners it is Sufism that bridges the gap between the foreign worldview espoused by many Muslims and the Western that we’re accustomed to and resonate with. It is Sufism with its tolerance and humility that appeals to us and not the racial-slash-religious superiority that rankles.

Western Muslims need Western mosques with Westernized leaders, leaders who are male and female, young and old, from all walks of life and all cultural backgrounds and at different stages in their journeys who pray, worship, laugh and fellowship together as friends and equals. Western Muslims need to develop their own view and opinions, their own theological constructs and cultural paradigms and in essence develop the courage to be themselves, not fall for the cultural hoaxes all too often paraded as “Islam”. Western Muslims need to be brave enough to recognize that nothing is sacrosanct, not even the *hajj*, which has absolutely no applicability to us whatsoever (or any Muslims today). GOD is within each of us, not our dress and coverings, not our rituals and adherence to strict schools of jurisprudence, but in you and I as believing individuals. Therefore here in New Zealand we should be free to incorporate Polynesian dance, Maori chanting, Asian meditative practices and whatever else fellow submitters may bring into the melting-pot of the deen. No, this does not mean we ostracize traditionalists or immigrants but it does mean we have the faith and courage to pursue the One on our own terms which they’re welcome to join in with should they desire to. Last but not least, Western Muslims have the liberty and freedom to stand up and truly identify what Islam actually is: surrender to GOD not deen.

APPENDIX 1

The Nafs (abridged) from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nafs>

The inciting *nafs* (*nafs-i-ammara*)

In its primitive stage the *nafs* incites us to commit evil: this is the *nafs* as the lower self, the base instincts. In the eponymous Sura of the Qur'an, the prophet Joseph says "Yet I claim not that my *nafs* was innocent: Verily the *nafs* of man incites to evil." Here he is explaining the circumstances in which he came to be falsely imprisoned for the supposed seduction of Zuleika.

Islam emphasizes the importance of fighting *nafs* because the prophet Muhammad said after returning from a war, "We now return from the small struggle (Jihad Asghar) to the big struggle (Jihad Akbar)". His companions asked, "Oh prophet of God, what is the big struggle?" He replied, "The struggle against *nafs*."

The Qur'an enjoins the faithful "to hinder the *nafs* from lust", and another hadith warns that "the worst enemy you have is [the *nafs*] between your sides." Rumi warns of the *nafs* in its guise of religious hypocrisy, saying "the *nafs* has a rosary and a Koran in its right hand, and a scimitar and dagger in the sleeve."

The self-accusing *nafs* (*nafs-i-lawwama*)

In Sura al-Qiyama the Qur'an mentions "the self-accusing *nafs*". This is the stage where "the conscience is awakened and the self accuses one for listening to one's ego. One repents and asks for forgiveness." Here the *nafs* is inspired by your heart, sees the results of your actions, agrees with your brain, sees your weaknesses, and aspires to perfection.

The *nafs* at peace (*nafs-i-mutma'inna*)

In Sura al-Fajr the Qur'an mentions "the *nafs* at peace". This is the ideal stage of ego for Sufis. On this level one is firm in one's faith and leaves bad manners behind. The soul becomes tranquil, at peace. At this stage Sufis have relieved themselves of all materialism and worldly problems and are satisfied with the will of God.

APPENDIX 2

Our credo (Revised as of 2013)

ARTICLE I

There is no God but GOD the Pre Existent, the Absolute Reality in which all other realities, including our own, are real within.

ARTICLE II

Fitra is the nature of the Pre-Existent in all things and thus, is the pre-existent nature of all things, including humankind.

ARTICLE III

The Friend is not constrained by nor limited to scripture, religion, time or humanity.

ARTICLE IV

Because the Way of the Friend is chosen it should not be enforced by law. The separation of religion and state ensures no one religious majority which finds itself in power abuses said power by persecuting and outlawing those of another faith.

ARTICLE V

The Tanakh, Bible and Quran are our scriptures and we know each contains error, man-made additions, distortion and mistranslation, the use of metaphor, revelation, truth, knowledge and Life. None contain the verbatim words of GOD but are our human responses to our human GOD-idea(s).

ARTICLE VI

Religion exists for us, not we for it. When religious laws and practices clash with our humanity then we should discard said religious laws and practices, not our humanity.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Akhenaten = Pharaoh of the Eighteenth dynasty of Egypt who ruled for 17 years and died perhaps in 1336 BC or 1334 BC; noted for abandoning traditional Egyptian polytheism and introducing monotheistic worship centered on the Aten

Akonga = Student, learner, trainee (Maori language); our term for darvish/dervish

Annihilation = Also known as *fana* in Sufism, it refers to the dissolution of the Ego and unity with the Divine

Bahá'u'lláh = Founder of the Baha'i faith

Bible = Christian scriptures that include the Hebrew *Tanakh* referred to as the Old Testament in Christian theology

Bidah = Innovation within the deen; an act, decision or law considered contrary to established practice

Dar al-Amn = House of safety, a term proposed to describe the status of Muslims either in the West or other non-Muslim societies; usually refers to countries where Muslims have the right to practice their religion

Dar al-Harb (Dar al-Garb) = House of war; refers to those countries which Muslims have war with; also interpreted as countries where Islam is not yet established (territories that do have a treaty of nonaggression or peace with Muslims are called *dar al-ahd* or *dar al-suh*)

Dar al-Islam (Dar as-Salam) = House or abode of peace; the term is used by Muslim scholars to refer to those countries where Muslims can practice their religion freely

Darvish/Dervish = a Sufi practitioner or ascetic; Islamic mystics

Dawah = Evangelization

Din ("deen") = Arabic for religion and often used as a substitute for "Islam"

Divine = Sufi terminology for GOD

Fatwa = A non-binding legal judgment, ruling or pronouncement by an Islamic scholar or similarly recognized religious authority (these can be in conflict with each other)

Fitra = Our original or primordial nature already aware of GOD the One

Hadith = Believed sayings and acts of Prophet Muhammad; not part of the Quran

Ijtihad = Traditionally it means an independent decision regarding a matter not yet covered by established law/theology yet based on Quran or hadith; we interpret it as reaching your own consensus with or without such measures as should be expected in our modern age

Imam = In Sunni practice a teacher or congregational leader, in Shia practice the rightful leader of the ummah

Injeel = Gospels of the New Testament of the Christian Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (sometimes extended to mean the NT as a whole)

Inshallah = Arabic expression of "Lord willing" aka "I hope to visit my sister overseas, inshallah"

Isa Masih = Jesus the Messiah aka Jesus Christ

Isa-nature = Sufi o te tahi terminology meaning to have the nature or character of Jesus Christ

Islam = Surrender/submission to GOD; usually indicative of the Muslim deen

Jihad = Translates as "struggle" or striving in the name of GOD and is considered an important religious duty. It can be broken down into an internal struggle against the nafs, an external

struggle to establish a just society (often misconstrued as a Muslim society), and a religious holy war against unbelievers

Jizyah = Tax paid by non-Muslims living in Islamic lands to the state; exempts them from the duties of Islam like military service and zakat

Kefir = An unbeliever

Madrasah = Religious school (Muslim)

Madhab = The five schools of religious jurisprudence which are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali and Jafari

Maori = Considered the indigenous people of New Zealand, Maori are descended from the Polynesian peoples who inhabit the South Pacific

Mishnah = First major written redaction of the Jewish oral traditions (redaction: multiple texts combined as one with minor alterations); also the first major work of Rabbinic Judaism according to Wikipedia (reference <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mishnah>)

Mushrik = Polytheist, pagan, idolater, disbeliever in the Oneness of Allah, a person who worships others along with Allah

Muslim = Submitter to GOD

Nafs = Lower self or base instincts, what Christianity refers to as the “sinful nature”

Primordial = Our original nature that recognizes the Divine

Purdah = The sequestering away of females from male view

Quran = Muslim scriptures

Qutb = The pole or spiritual axis of the age

Rashidun Caliphate = The first four (“rightly-guided” according to Sunni tradition) Muslim caliphs; Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affanm and Ali ibn Abi Talib the first Shia Imam

Ruh = Spirit or soul

Shahid (shaheed) = Martyr, title give to those who die in service to “Islam”

Sheikh/Shaykh = Honorific title given to a teacher (by their students)

Sufism = The practice of loving GOD such that one willingly chooses to remove all barriers or veils between themselves and Allah

Sunnah = Believed acts of Muhammad

Talmud = Central text of mainstream Judaism that takes the form of a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history (reference <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud>); often interchanged with the *Gemara*

Tanakh = Hebrew Bible including the *Torah* referred to as the Old Testament in the Christian deen

Taqwa = GOD-consciousness

Tariqat = Spiritual path i.e. tasawwuf

Tasawwuf = Sufism, considered by many as the spiritual/esoterical aspect of Islam

Tawhid (Tawheed) = Belief in GOD as One; Islamic concept of monotheism

Tawrat = Torah, first five books of the Hebrew Tanakh/Old Testament

Ulema = Body of Muslim clergy who have completed several years of training and study of Islamic science

Ummah = Global community of Muslim believers